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ISAAC ASIMOV

editorial

THE BOOM IN SCIENCE FICTION

○ I am frequently asked by reporters: "How does the current boom in science fiction affect you?"

The answer is, "Not at all and in no way. The boom in science fiction to which you refer is in the movies and television. My own science fiction is in the magazines and books. The latter is doing well, thank you; but it is the former which is having its boom, and the two are of different species. They bear the same name but there the similarity ends."

That always surprises the reporters, and it may even surprise you, so let me explain. In order to do so, I must give the two species different names in order to avoid confusion.

In the movies and television, science fiction deals primarily with images, so we might call it image-science-fiction. Since the show-business people and journalists who talk about image-science-fiction refer to it, abominably, as sci-fi, suppose we call image-science-fiction i-sci-fi, or, better yet, eye-sci-fi.

The science fiction of magazines and books we can simply call what we have always called it: science fiction, or possibly SF.

To begin with, then, eye-sci-fi has an audience that is fundamentally different from that of science fiction. In order for eye-sci-fi to be profitable it must be seen by tens of millions of people, in order for science fiction to be

profitable it need be read only by tens of thousands of people. This means that some 90 percent (perhaps as much as 99 percent) of the people who go to see eye-sci-fi are likely never to have read science fiction.

The purveyors of eye-sci-fi cannot assume that their audience knows anything about science, has any experience with the scientific imagination, or even has any interest in science fiction.

But in that case, why should the purveyors of eye-sci-fi expect anyone to see the pictures? Because they intend to supply something that has no essential connection with science fiction, but that tens of millions of people are willing to pay money to see. What is that? Why, scenes of destruction.

You can have spaceships destroying spaceships, monsters destroying cities, comets destroying the Earth. These are called "special effects" and they are what people go for. A piece of eye-sci-fi without destruction is, I think, almost unheard of. If such a thing were made, no one would go to see it; or, if it were so good that it would indeed pull a small audience, it would not be thought of as science fiction of any kind.

The overriding necessity for having special effects in order to make sure a piece of eye-sci-fi can make money means that such movies are incredibly expensive

This puts the producers in a bind. They may possibly make so much money that any expense is justified—but how can they know in advance the movie will make that kind of money? They don't, so there is always a tendency to cut down on expenses, and cheap special effects are incredibly bad.

Then, too, even if a producer decides to spend freely on special effects, he is quite likely to skimp on other aspects of the picture, and first in line for skimping is always the writing. The result is that the plot and dialog of any piece of eye-sci-fi is generally several grades below poor. Once a character has managed to say "Oh, wow!" as a spaceship explodes he is usually a spent force.

Still further, once people get used to special effects and destruction, they quickly get jaded. The next picture must have more and better special effects; which means more expense and rotteness everything-but-special-effects.

Finally, the producers of eye-sci-fi have the "bottom line" psychology—that is, they consider only the final bookkeeping calculation that tells whether one has made a profit or a loss and how much of either.

Naturally, we all have a bottom-line psychology. I write for money; and you do whatever you do for money. Still, the larger the sum of money you invest and the

Adventure

Magazine

larger the profit or loss you may come out with, the more the bottom line tends to swallow up everything else. My own books, essays, and stories represent such small profits or losses individually that I can afford to go my own way, aim for the unusual now and then, take a chance on quality once in a while, shrug off the occasional failure. You, undoubtedly, can do the same. A movie or TV producer can't. One failure may wipe him out. One success may make him a millionaire.

With the intense bottom-line psychology that comes when one throw of the dice is the difference between pauperdom and influence, it is impossible for a producer to deal with anything that he doesn't think is sure-fire. In eye-sci-fi only the special effects approach being sure-fire. Everything else, therefore, receives no attention. Even if some minor facet of the production can be changed in such a way as to greatly improve it without either trouble or expense to speak of, it won't be done. Why should the producer take the time or make the effort to do so when it doesn't matter to him, and when all his concentration must be on the sure-fire?

Well, then, do I see no good in eye-sci-fi at all? No, I am not a complete curmudgeon in this respect. Some eye-sci-fi can be amusing if it contains humor and has the grace not to take itself too seriously. That's why I enjoyed *Star Wars* and why I expect to enjoy *Superman* when I get around to seeing it. Then, too, if something is outright fantasy and if cartoon techniques take some of the pressure off the special effects, the results can be tolerable. I enjoyed *Lord of the Rings*.

Besides that, small percentage of those who are introduced to eye-sci-fi may happen to know how to read, and these may be impelled by curiosity to read science fiction, something they might not

otherwise have thought of doing. Thus a boom in eye-sci-fi means our audience can grow somewhat even if it doesn't quite go along with the boom.

It may seem to you that I haven't made the difference between SF and eye-sci-fi clear. After all, consider this magazine you are now holding.

Is it not primarily devoted to adventure science fiction, to scenes of action, to destruction?

Yes, we want action, and if it is necessary to destroy a spaceship, we destroy it—but destroying a spaceship in words is no more costly or difficult than doing anything else in words, so it doesn't take up all the mind and effort of all of us. We have time and will and active desire to add other things as well—plot, motivation, characterization, and some respect for science.

Since we are all only human, we may fall short in these added qualities out of sheer lack of ability, but it is never out of a contempt for our audience or out of indifference to anything but the bottom line.

We are not nobler than the people in Hollywood; if we were exposed to their pressures, we might do just as they do.

But we are not in Hollywood, we are here; and so we need only please one thousandth the size of audience that they do. We like to think that our thousandth part of the audience happens to be the best thousandth. It is an audience that can read, that likes its adventure with good writing stirred in, that has a respect for science even when it doesn't have a professional understanding of it.

For that reason, we like you more than the money we make out of you.

You see, we don't make enough money to fall in love with it exclusively, so we can afford to like you, and write and edit and publish for you.

We hope it shows.

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Letters

TO THE EDITOR □ TO THE EDGE

DEAR SERGEANT SATELLITE:

You convinced me, already!

After reading most of the stories in the premier issue of Asimov's *SF Adventure Magazine* (hereafter known to the Known Universe as *AsfAm*) I decided that it was a superlative magazine. But after perusing the second issue, reading three of the seven stories, "The Feghoot," "The SF in Hollywood Column," and "The Letters," I must unabashedly say it! *AsfAm* is the best science fiction magazine being published today. Oh, and I must go even further than that. *AsfAm* is the best science fiction magazine to come down the pike in ten years.

As an aside I'd like to say that the art in this issue was a little down from last time, i.e., no Shomburg. But there were illos by George Barr, Jack Gaughan, and Val Lakey to amend everything. Barr and Lakey turned in particularly striking jobs.

Back to the stories, at least the ones I read.

I enjoyed "How It Happened." It really was a new twist and fairly hilarious as well.

"Longshot" was another funny story by Mr. Jack C. Haldeman II, who is one of my favorite writers working in SF today. After an inauspicious start with boring melodramas like "Laura's Theme" (fgh!), Mr. Haldeman has emerged as a splendid satirical successor to the likes of Eric Frank Russell and

Henry Kuttner. No I'm not making any gross general comparisons. Haldeman does indeed have a voice of his own, and I can hardly wait for his novel, *Nightmare Station*. Gorgeous title for a SF novel!

Grendel Briartown's "Feghoot" was incomprehensible to me, but us Divinely Neglected schlemiels can't always catch these esoteric plays on words. By the way, does Grendel have a monopoly on the Feghoot character? [Yes GHS]

Finally, there's "Starschool" by the Brothers Haldeman.

Wait, do that again, with drumroll and crescendo.

"Starschool" by Monsieur Joe Haldeman and Monsieur Jack C. Haldeman II.

It would seem that Mr. Scithers likes stories where the main character is some kind of oversized superperson around two meters in height. Witness Poul Anderson's female Amason character in "Captive of the Centaurian" in the first issue. "Starschool" worked well on so many levels it gives me chills just thinking about it. Adventure story, character study, horrifying glance at an overcrowded, ruthless, future Terran society. This story should be in all the Best Of anthologies, hell with the length. It should be showered, perhaps hellishly, by awards. It should prove once and for all that these Haldemans write the pants off of Joanna Russ and Sam Delany and Silverberg and Sheffield and Varley and all the rest. What does it take to make you laugh and cry and feel brutal anger (like when the clubmen in the arena start beating Markos the Heller to death and

Carl Bok yells "He's out! He's out!" That's a powerful scene! I don't care if I'm going overboard with my praise, this story excited me and affected me almost as much as anything I've read. It's a classic adventure story and I can't say enough about it, but I'll stop here. I don't want to get maudlin.

Anyway, keep up the good, great, fabulous, stupendous work Mr. George Scithers. You've made me a giggling, gleeful kid again.

Sincerely yours,

Denny Daley
Chicago IL

There was a Sergeant Saturn once. If you're old enough to remember him, making you a giggling, gleeful kid again is quite an achievement. We'll try to keep it up.

—Isaac Asimov

DEAR MR. SCITHERS:

(Sorry, Doc., he is the Editor.)

On December 26th my car was forced into a snowbank by a Nubian two-man Warhawk. I am sure the pilot meant no harm, but when I dug myself out I sprained my back and ended up in the hospital in pelvic traction.

Two days later my brother, John, brought me the spring issue of *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine* and the January issue of *IA'sfm*. When I saw the covers of the two, half the pain disappeared and the traction belt seemed far less confining. The prospect of spending New Year's Eve flat on my back didn't seem quite so dreary.

After reading "Keepersmith," with its predictable, yet well executed twist, I was doing "knee-ups." I give the author four stars.

"The Magician's Apprentice" had me sitting up and smiling. Long-year's chronicle is enjoyable and this segment developed very nicely. Give him three stars.

Craig Miller's article on SF merchandising was informative. Two stars.

"Fee...oot...?" Back flat on my back. "One black hole is too generous."

Dr. Asimov's "How It Happened" sat me back up. The Good Doctor gets two stars.

The doctors let me walk a few steps down the hall after I read "Longshot." Will three stars be sufficient?

"Second Coming": The suspense sat me back down, but the afterglow stood me back up. Two and a half stars.

"Starschool" did it! I present to the Haldemans my personal degrees of Doctor of Medicine. George Barr's artwork earns him at least a Nursing Degree First Class. Unfortunately, St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Ithaca is now looking for a dozen nurses to replace those I wore out after finishing the Haldemans' story. Five stars, all with planets suitable for human habitation.

Levity aside, George, your magazines did build up my spirits when they were at a low point. Hospitals are not fun at the best of times and anyone who can help lighten the spirits of someone who has to stay in one deserves thanks.

M. Weight Wood
Boonville NY

I wonder if we can make the magazines a Blue Cross expense?

—Isaac Asimov

DEAR PERSONS:

I have to admit that I was somewhat disappointed in the first issue of *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine*. It wasn't actually bad, but it wasn't up to the standards that I've come to expect from you folks. This goes for both the stories and the art. However, I'm happy to say that, in my opinion, both the stories and the art were greatly improved in the second issue. Keep it up and I'll subscribe as soon as you start offering subscription sales.

I enjoyed everything in the second issue, but will only comment on a few things. "The Casque of

Lamont T. Yado" was pretty good, if you could get past the title, that is. "How It Happened" was interesting, but not exactly what the word adventure brings to my mind. "Starschool" tended to ramble on a bit in the middle, but the rambling was enjoyable, so I really didn't mind.

I really liked "The Magician's Apprentice." Having read "The Tryouts" in *IA'sfm*, I was delighted to see another Momus story in *Asimov's*. (And even more delighted to see the third one in the January '79 issue of *IA'sfm*. I have not read it yet, but if it's anything like the first two, I'll be looking forward to a fourth).

Keep up the good work, in both of your magazines. Thanks.

Sincerely,

David Cederstrom
Oneonta NY

Our standards are perhaps impossible either to attain or maintain, because we aim for perfection, but—we will continue to do our best.

—Isaac Asimov

Newstand distribution is a major problem for every magazine. For one just getting under way, like this one, the problem can be acute. While we are surviving, it's always very helpful to us if you tell us where the magazine is getting good newstand exposure—and where not. It also helps us—and you—if you politely ask your local newstand or bookstore to stock this magazine, especially now that we're settled down to a regular quarterly schedule.

Letters on this or any other subject of general interest should be sent to the editor of the magazine at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101, while inquiries directed to the advertising department or the special order department should be sent to Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017.

And remember: look for us three months from now! We have a lot coming up!

—George H. Scithers



THE JAREN



By Frederick Longbeard
Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

The hunting on Baolphor, as always, was good. My party had bagged its limit of the elusive Hook goats, and we sat around a fire that night—Dr. Velstock, Jamie Fender, the developer Wiggins, and I. The night was warm, yet we stoked the fire for its light—light that prompted memories and loosened tongues almost as well as the Purim that we were drinking in quantities that would have been distressing had we been in more civilized surroundings. But the campfire after the hunt was as ingrained in the race of humans as was the grasp for land, or money, and much older.

We had taken on an old Shikki when we reached Baolphor, to cook, clean up, and haul some of our gear. They are unreliable, to say the least. I don't think anyone has seen one of the dark-skinned humanoids sober—I never have. But they are cheap, and sufficiently obedient when clear-headed enough to understand orders. Our Shikki had gathered wood for the fire, and had retired to the edges of the clearing surrounding our camp, with a bottle of Purim. The old fellow seemed to soak the stuff away in quantities that we found not distressing, but astounding.

The developer Wiggins, his legs stretched out and his back lean-

ing against a log, looked around at the firelight reflecting from the trees, then nodded. "You are right, Hill," he said to me, "this planet has many possibilities." He waved a hand at the night. "Chief among them is no bugs."

I laughed. "I thought you would see it my way, once you visited."

Wiggins nodded. "And you own all this property we have been on?"

"Yes, and quite a bit more. Land here is cheap, but not for long. Other developers have been looking here as well."

The developer smiled, then looked in my direction. "When I like a place, the competition tends to fade away."

"I know. That is why I made an effort to interest you in my proposition. And you like the place?"

Wiggins stared into the fire. "Yes, I think so." He turned toward me and smiled. "I confess that I was worried, never having been on this planet before."

Dr. Velstock leaned forward. "You weren't worried on account of the Mithad, I hope. They have been as docile a bunch as you could ever hope to see, even though they can now vote."

Wiggins shook his head. "My concern was about the Shakkies, but," he held out his hands, "there seems to be nothing to worry about from that quarter."



He turned toward the old Shikki.

"Tell us your story,

and if your throat gets dry, our supply of Purim is handy."

Wiggins laughed roundly, and was soon joined by Fender and Velstock. Normally, I would have joined them, but for once I took a good look at a Shikki. He wore the same kind of leather shirt and black sarong-like underwrapping worn by all the Shikkies, but those eyes—there was a haunted brilliance there that I had never seen before. That dull-eyed, out-of-focus appearance I had come to associate with Shikkies was gone. Eeola stood, observed my companions, then turned away. In a moment, he was gone from the clearing.

Velstock laughed and turned toward Wiggins. "I'm afraid you offended the old fraud."

Wiggins shrugged and took another swallow of his Purim. Lowering the cup, he chuckled. "Shikkies do have a low entertainment value, don't they?" He faced Fender and Velstock. "Enough of that. Are both of you interested in this development proposal?"

I stood. "I should follow the old Shikki."

The developer waved a hand back and forth. "Don't bother. He bores me, anyway."

"I should make sure that the drunken old fool doesn't fall off a ledge and kill himself."

Fender nodded. "It would never do if we had to carry all our own things."

I smiled, then left my companions and turned into the jungle after the Shikki. He was not far. Eeola sat on a rocky outcropping overlooking a steep cliff. The jungle floor spread into the distance, and on the horizon stood the peculiar landmark that marked the center of my property. In the bright light of Adin, Boalphor's only moon, the feature seemed large than I remembered seeing it during the day. It was a portion of the jungle floor, risen on a huge cake-shaped formation of rock. I turned from it to see the old Shikki finishing his bottle of Purim.

"My friends didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Come back to the fire."

Eeola issued one sharp laugh, then tossed his empty bottle over the cliff. He laughed again, then listened as the bottle smashed on the rocks below.

Jamie Fender laughed. "The Shikkies? You have nothing to worry about from the Shikkies, Wiggins. All they want is a bottle and a dry spot to sleep."

We all chuckled. Wiggins nodded, then turned toward Fender. "I see all this now, but on another planet, it is hard to see things as clearly. Stories about the Shikkies are still used to frighten children where I come from." He cocked his head in the direction of our Shikki beast of burden. "But I see more clearly now."

Dr. Velstock nodded. "Since the Shikkies were conquered, they have been no trouble—"

"No!"

We all looked up. The old Shikki stood at the edge of the clearing, weaving as he held his precious Purim bottle around the neck with a tight grasp. Dr. Velstock laughed. "No offense, old fellow." He turned to Wiggins. "I can't imagine what's got into him."

The Shikki staggered toward us until he stood before the fire. He was tall, and his muscles spoke of a strong youth. His skin was almost black, his hair a shock of white streaked with yellow. His black eyes seemed to study us, but from the level in his Purim bottle, I passed it off to drunken behavior.

I stood and pointed my finger at the old Shikki. "Go back to your drinking, Eeola."

The Shikki held the bottle in his left hand. With his right, he pointed at Dr. Velstock. "We are not conquered, human. The Shikku cannot be conquered."

Velstock shook his head and laughed. "I beg to differ with you, old fellow, but I am as familiar with the war of the four stars as anyone. I was in it."

The Shikki took a pull from his bottle, then squatted down beside the fire. "I too was in the war, human, and I say we were not conquered."

Jamie Fender snickered, then jabbed Dr. Velstock in the arm. "Perhaps our historians have lied, Doctor. I would hear this old fellow's version."

Wiggins laughed and poured himself another cup of Purim. "Let us hear this version. I would like to know why we rule Boalphor and the other Shikki planets, yet the Shikkies are not a conquered race."

"They do not hurt my feelings." He shook his head. "I should have said nothing, but this place," he held his hands out toward the landmark. "It loosens a drunken tongue."

I lowered myself and sat on a rock facing the Shikki. "This place has special meaning to you?"

Eeola shook his head. "It is of no interest to you."

I held out my hands. "Then why am I sitting here, and why did I ask?"

The Shikki shrugged. "To understand the meaning of this place to me, you must understand me, and for that . . ." he held up an arm and pointed at the sky, "you must understand from where I came." He dropped the arm into his lap and shook his head. "Too much understanding, from a human."

I was not used to Shikkies talking to me in that manner, and my face grew hot. But, for some reason, I held my peace. Eeola sat quietly, and for such a long time, I felt certain the old fellow had passed out. I was about to leave when a pale blue shimmering began in the jungle below. It faded, then began again in a new place. It faded once again and I strained my eyes for it. I turned to Eeola to ask him about it, and the blue light passed between me and the Shikki, then seemed to settle beside him. I could not move; it was as though my buttocks had become rooted to the rock. After a few moments, another such light joined the first, then another, and another, until four separate lights made a circle, with Eeola forming a fifth part of it. Slowly, Eeola turned his head, until he faced me.

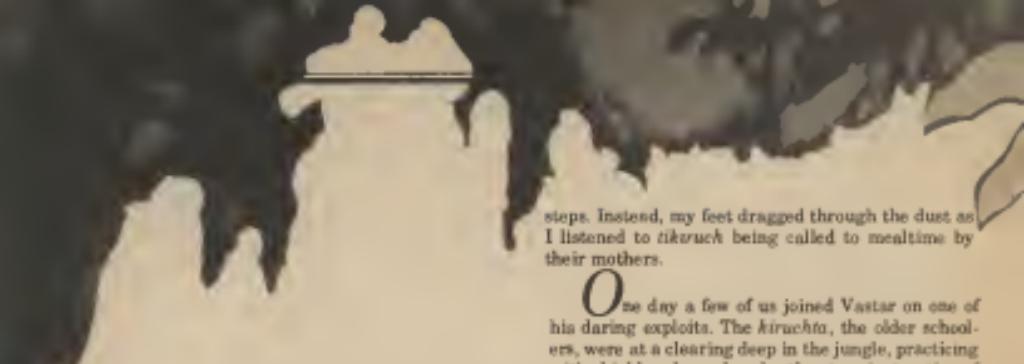
**"Then, listen, human,
while I take words
and grant life to those
who I am not yet
able to grant death."**

Iwould tell you of my Jaren; of Vastar, our warrior *Di*, who took the charge in battle much as he did when we were children; of Gemieler, whose broad back and jokes held us together through flame and privation; of mighty Dob, whose ruthlessness on the field of battle was matched only by his gentleness with a lost or hungry animal; of Timbenevva, whose pipes could make flagging spirits soar, and whose sly tongue could talk the very stars from the sky; and, of myself, I, Eeola, was the youngest member of the Jaren.

The human historians—those who deign to mention it—pass off the Jaren as a military organization; a form of half-squad in human terms; but the Jaren is much more. True, it is the building block of the Shikazu infantry, but it is, as well, family, schoolmates, friends, and yet more even than this. You are the Jaren, and without the Jaren, you are not.

Before entering the military, before adulthood, before instruction at the village *kirch*, as naked children playing at war with moss forts and water guns, the Jaren is formed. Over forty Earth years ago, in my village on the planet Tenuet, my story begins.

Ahrm was but a tiny village, no more than a wide place in the road on the way to the golden city of Meydal, but its single dusty street crowded with wattle huts was the center of my universe. As a *tikiruch*, a carefree preschooler running naked with my mates, nothing seemed more important to me than joining in Jaren with Vastar. All the children of Ahrm admired Vastar, for even as a callow *tikiruch*, he stood a head or better above the rest of us, could outrun us all, and could wrestle any three of his mates to the ground. In our games, he would choose them, organize them, then win them. When we would take our water guns and deploy through the jungle to ambush phantom armies and shadow monsters, Vastar would always lead us. Even the elders at the evening meeting fire would nod at him, knowing someday Vastar would *Di* a Jaren, and be-



cause of that, the Jaren would be great and do heroic deeds. Such would reflect well on Ahrm. I would daydream, but deep in my heart I knew that when Vastar formed his Jaren, I would not find myself one of its five. But toothless old Jevvey, my grandmother, had the faith that I lacked. She once sat before her hut tending her evening meal, stripped so wrapped in yanna leaves, baked in the ground over a bed of turawood coals. She sat as motionless as a smoke-blackened carving, her straggles of thin white hair hanging at the sides of her head.

"The evening finds you sad, little one."

I looked down and nodded. "Yes, Grandmother."

"Must I pull the reason from you as the fishers drag eels from their holes?"

I sighed, then shrugged. "Grandmother, will I never be joined in Jaren?"

The old woman snorted. "You are the son of the Ice Flower and the Silver Bird, two respected Jarens. You ask foolish questions."

"But I am small. Even you call me 'little one.' What Jaren would have me?"

Jevvey shook her head. "The ghosts of my Jaren mates weep at your foolishness. Take care, else they shall steal into your but and rob you of your breath."

I frowned. "I am not a child, Grandmother. You can't frighten me with tales of ghosts."

Jevvey looked at me, her eyes soft and black. "Eola, I am the last of my Jaren, yet my mates still stand with me. They will always be with me until they call me to the endless sleep." She poked at the steaming ground with a stick. "One day you shall be part of a respected Jaren, and, perhaps years from now, you will see that the Jaren is forever. We are but bone and flesh, but the Light that fills you as an adult never dies." She sniffed and began scooping off the dirt from the cooked so. "It is time for you to go home, little one."

I stood, wished her a good night, then walked the darkening path to my father's hut. Had I not been despondent about my chances of being joined in Jaren, the talk of ghosts would have burried my

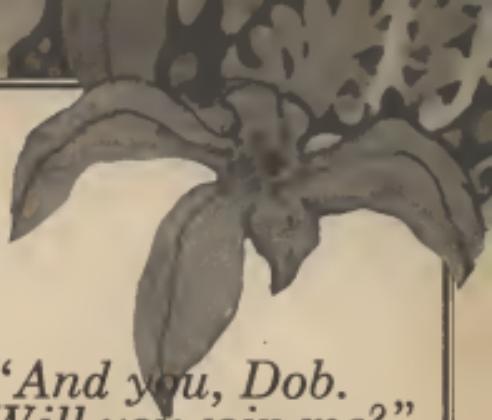
steps. Instead, my feet dragged through the dust as I listened to tikuuch being called to mealtime by their mothers.

One day a few of us joined Vastar on one of his daring exploits. The *kiruchtu*, the older schoolers, were at a clearing deep in the jungle, practicing with shield and wand under the stern instruction of Lodar, the village fencing master. Although the wands were at low energy output, a burst or slash on naked skin would blister it. A stray beam could blind a wide-eyed *tikuuch*, which is why we were forbidden to watch them practice, and which is why we skulked through the jungle to observe our seniors being put through their drills.

Crouching on all fours, peering out from beneath broad yanna leaves, our disrespectful band watched with eager eyes as the *kiruchtu*, paired off in twos, traded beams and parries. Each student wore the *be*, the half-dress wrapped around the waist with the tail pulled between the legs and tucked in front. Their skins were already the deep brown of rich soil, with streaks of pink on cheeks, shoulders, and thighs showing where wands in quick hands had found their marks. Each student held the clear wand, each tipped with its burning blue jewel, in the left hand, while right hands clasped the grips of black deflection shields. We giggled watching the students going wall-eyed, with one eye on opponent and the other on Lodar. No student dared let a stray beam fall on the fencing master, for Lodar would take this as a challenge. The student would then have to square off with the master and take his licks.

Lodar strode among the sweating students, pointing here and commenting there. He wore the *nabe*, the forest green full dress of an adult. His shield was slung on his back, but his wand was kept at the ready in his left hand. After a few moments of watching, we noticed one of the students being bested by an opponent obviously his superior at arms. With wand and shield, the hapless *kiruchtu* defended himself in a blur of arms, but the coins of chance were against him. As he backed away, the tail of his *be* unstacked and fell behind his scrabbling feet, where he stepped upon it, pulling the entire dress from his waist.

As we pained at our stifled giggles, none of us noticed Lodar slip into the jungle and come up behind us. The grizzled old master must have smiled as he saw our row of brown bums sticking out at him from under the yanna plants, but in the flesh



of an eye, our giggles turned to yelps. Our band jumped to its feet, each one clutching a burning cheek in each hand. Ledor's skilled wand had played across our buttocks, and for the next few days there would be much sleeping on stomachs and eating while standing in the village of Ahrm. The master scolded us and sent us running back toward the village to nurse our dignities.

Each one of us bore a pink stripe as evidence of our infraction, and we were reluctant to bring them to our huts, for when we did our parents would discover our sin. Until the pain of Ledor's wand eased, none of us could bear having the hard hands of our angry fathers popping off of our burned and chubby cheeks. Most of the others fled to hideouts of their own, while Vastar, Gemislor, Dob, Timbenevva and I sulked in the brush behind the village. None of the others were crying, but it was almost more than I could do to swallow my own tears. The Shikazu take humiliation hard, and our striped buttocks would be cause for jokes and laughter for years to come. Our faces burned more fiercely than did our bums.

While we stood sullenly, rubbing our humiliated flesh, I remember with the perspective of youth, thinking that I could not possibly survive that moment. It was then that Vastar laughed. The cream blond of his mane shook, then he threw his head back and howled. Leaping atop a stump, he held out his arms. "Gather 'round me, mates; gather 'round."

The four of us stood before the stump, our humiliation temporarily forgotten in our concern for our friend's sanity. He laughed at the sky, then looked down at us. "Mates, this day we have all been bled with the same wand, and it is no shame to have Ledor's fire kiss your skin." He smiled, then nodded. "We are one in this, mates, and I would now form my Jaren.

Gemislor, will you join me?"

Gemislor nodded, his eyes glowing. The elders had commented at many fires at how slow our generation of *tikiruch* was in forming *Jaren*s. Many of them thought it was a sign that the Shikazu spirit was on the wane, but the cause was nothing so profound. We were all waiting for Vastar to form his *Jaren* in the hopes of being among its number.

"And you, Dob. Will you join me?"

Dob's hulking shoulders pulled back as his spine straightened. "Aye, Vastar. Aye."

"And you, Timbenevva?"

"Aye. Your Jaren I will join."

Vastar turned toward me. I was smaller than the others and the worst runner in Ahrm. My most outrageous dreams did not see me thus. I swear my heart jumped as Vastar spoke.

"And you, Eola. Will you join me?"

My heart stopped as I felt my mouth ask the question it had to ask. "Why me, Vastar? Why do you choose me?" I waved my hand at the others. "The blind can see why you choose Gem, Dob, and Tim; they are tall, strong, brave."

My lower lip trembled as Vastar stepped down from his stump and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Eola, a great *Jaren* must have more than brawn and speed; it must also have brains. This is what my father has taught me, and he speaks the truth. You are the smartest *tikiruch* in Ahrm, except for me. What do you say? Will you join me?"

I nodded as my face exploded into smiles. Vastar smiled back, then turned and mounted his stump. "Our *Jaren* is formed, and we shall swear so before the meeting fire tonight."

"Vastar," called Timbenevva. "We may wear our paint now that the *Jaren* is formed. What shall our symbol be?"

Dob admired the blue-painted flying creature he had seen on the left arms of a *Jaren* from another



All but Vastar lifted their heads

"Vastar of Ahrm is our *Di*"

"And this shall ever be so?"

"Aye."

The bedman nodded, then looked at Vastar. "Di of the Jaren of the Redbar."

Vastar looked up. "I am Vastar."

"Do you swear to *Di* this Jaren with fairness, strength, wisdom, and to do your best to bring it before the Light?"

"I so swear."

The bedman looked down, opened the book and held out a single brush dipped in red paint. "Make the mark of the Redbar, then, Vastar, and bring honor to your village." The people of the village cheered as our *Di* walked around the fire, took the brush and made the mark of the Redbar in the book. When he rejoined us, the five of us turned and faced the people, our chests bursting with pride. Our fathers and mothers stood up from the seated people and came to us.

On the dark path leading to my father's hut, my mother kissed me, then swiftly ran ahead to relate the news to my grandmother. My father placed a massive hand on my shoulder. "Eoola, I am pleased for you—and proud. I can tell you now that, because of your size, I feared no Jaren would take you. But this—it is more than I could have hoped for you. Vastar will be a great *Di*, and you all will bring glory to the symbol of the Redbar."

I suppressed a desire to laugh and only nodded. "It is good that I pleased you, father."

We walked in silence for a time, then my father stopped, pulling me to a halt beside him. He had a curious expression on his face. "Eoola, might I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Father."

"The symbol of the Redbar; you wear it higher up than the others. Why is that?"

I felt my face flush in the dark. "It . . . it's because they are so much taller than I am . . . Father."

My father's right eyebrow went up, while the other curled into a frown. A twinkle grew in his black eyes, then his face relaxed. He nodded and resumed walking down the path. "Come, Eoola. It is time we were getting to our sleeping mats."

I gulped and followed.

village. Gem insisted on the bright yellow lightning bolts he had seen on a warrior's hairy chest. Tim and I were both shouting for attention when Vastar held up his hands for silence. "Listen mates. Our sign shall be a single red bar," he turned around and pointed at the pink stripe across his bum, "worn here."

Vastar raised his brow at us, we stood in silence for an instant, then all laughed. We would be spared our fathers' wrath, for the paint would hide the evidence. Laughing so hard he was barely able to stand, Dob ran to the village to secure paint and brushes. In the span of a few seconds I had become locked in life with the finest Jaren Ahrm would ever see and had adopted a curious sign that we would all be sworn to defend with our lives. Of such things are symbols made and destinies forged.

That night the five of us stood across the meeting fire from the bedman of Ahrm and declared our Jaren, our brightly painted backsides facing the people of the village. As I stood with my four tall companions, I could feel the eyes of envy dancing on my back. The pungent smell of turawood came from the fire while the pops and hisses joined the flickering light creating an aura that took us all back to the primitive ages of the first Jarens. The bedman, his deep green robe decked with golden chains, looked up from the village book wherein was entered the signs of all the village Jarens. His voice, though strong, was rough with age. Nevertheless, he fixed us all with an unblinking, black-eyed gaze. "There is no record of a Jaren of the Redbar in Ahrm." He closed the book and held out his arms. "This, then, is the Jaren of the Redbar?"

"Aye." We all responded with our heads bowed.

"Do you swear that your lives, your fortunes, and your futures are now as one, in the name of the Light?"

"We swear it."

"And who shall *Di* the Jaren of the Redbar?"

In time, the Redbar was presented to the five Jarens of our fathers where we were feasted and given advice. Afterwards, we were presented to the five Jarens of our mothers, again feasted, and inspected as material for future husbands. Until the very last of the Redbar was snared and wed, the Jarens of all of our mothers would scour the village, bragging, begging and negotiating, keeping sharp eyes out for females well placed in respected Jarens of their own.

In the years that followed, the Redbar had little time for such thoughts. Vastar took the duties of the *Di* seriously, and we ran, trained, wrestled and boxed, stopping only to eat and sleep. In time, although they remained taller than I, with the patient help of my brothers, I could run as well and even best them wrestling on rare occasion. However, once we donned our half-dress and began the *kirach*, it was my turn to help my brothers keep up with me. In between our lessons before the village classmaster, we met in the jungle clearing with Ledor to drill in arms. Ledor would always single out the Redbar for his severest criticisms, and by the look in his eye, I eventually became aware that our painted bums had fooled no one.

After classes and drills, Vastar would take us to the banks of the River Gnawi, where we would take our shield and wand and begin our drills. One on one, two on one, three on one, four on one. Jump, flash, parry, turn, flash—until the five of us ached and our bums hung limp between our legs, soaked with sweat. Then, placing our weapons aside, we would plunge into the cool waters of the Gnawi.

One day as we made our way to the riverbank, we heard laughter and splashing. Usurpers had moved into our swimming hole. We came through the trees and entered the clearing and spied a Jaren of village females, also *kirach*, using our water to cleanse themselves after their drills. Flowers on our faces, Vastar ordered the females from the water. They laughed and made rude suggestions. Our blood boiling, Vastar challenged the female *Di* to a match with wands and shield to decide the question.

The five females came naked from the water, reached to the trees for their half-dresses and covered their lower halves. We hefted our own weapons as they retrieved theirs from the grass, then we squared off. Disaster ensued. Back at the village, nursing our newly rotted hides, Vastar stormed up

and down in front of us.
"None of us? None of us won?"

Dob shrugged. "Vastar, I could not keep my mind on my drills. She bounced so . . ."

"Bah!" Vastar stamped his foot. "We have seen females before! And those females—we grew up with them! We have seen them naked since our first crwuls in the dust!"

Timbenevva shrugged. "It is different, somehow."

Vastar snorted. "Different! If that had been war, we would be dead! How can I bring this Jaren before the Light?"

Gemislor rubbed his chin, his eyes cast down. "This is all so true, Vastar, but explain why you didn't lay your wand on their *Di*?"

Vastar flushed. "Why, my attention was diverted because of the four of you stumbling moonfaces bending all effort to disgrace our Jaren."

Gemislor's expression did not change as he absorbed the explanation, but his eyes laughed. Vastar blushed, then laughed with us. "Very well, Redbar, but we must keep our minds on our drills. In the years to come, we will be presented with stronger attractions than that. Let us drill!"

True to his word, Vastar drilled and drilled us, there in the village street, until the horizon drank the sun. That night, as I lay my aching bones on my sleeping mat, I closed my eyes and dreamt of the lithe, black haired beauty that had smiled so sweetly just before burning the wand from my hand.

In our years of the *kirach*, the classmaster beat many things into our heads. Then it seemed to be a blur of facts and items of legend. Only now is it clear that every moment of our instruction was aimed at instilling in us the pride of the Shikazu, the pride of the unconquered warrior race of the planet Ten-set. True, we had merchants, builders, and administrators, but any one of them could push papers, tools, and cash boxes aside, heft wands and shields, and acquit themselves respectfully on a field of battle.



The Shikazu cannot be conquered; this was our one eternal truth. And through it, we came to accept that as individuals we could not be beaten, save by another Shikazu. We held nine planets of four solar systems under the wand, races more advanced, more numerous, and physically more impressive; but we held the wand, for we were the Shikazu.

At fencing drill, Ladar taught us nothing of quarter nor of surrender. His one subject: conquer. Press the opponent until he is vanquished, then move on to the next opponent. Those who lost contests at drills were driven by their Jaren to improve, until nothing could stand before their wands. Those who would not, or could not, improve their skills were dropped from drills, and dropped from their Jaren where they would be replaced by the more worthy. No one could bear the shame of a *kazu*—one discarded as being unfit—and a few of these drifted away from the village to live out their lives in the jungle or seek a place amongst the drags of the large cities. Most *kazu*, however, simply removed the energy guards on their wands and turned them upon themselves. No one wept for them.

This fate, and the constant pressure of my Jaren mates, polished my own skill with wand and shield until the five of us could put our backs together and stand off any ten opponents. Nevertheless, as our skills sharpened, so did Ladar's tongue in his verbal abuse of the Redbar. As time passed we became confident in our prowess with the wand, and ever more ingrained with fierce pride in the Shikazu, our Jaren, and in ourselves as individuals. The day had to come when Vastar was sure enough of himself and his Jaren to no longer accept Ladar's abuse. A *Di* with less wit would have seen red and challenged Ladar months before, but Vastar was exceptional, as only befits the *Di* of the Redbar Jaren.

At drills one day, the Redbar was squared off with the Jaren of the White Star. The White Star was senior to us, but we were leaving them in tatters, when Ladar called a halt to the drill. The two Jaren bowed toward each other, and then toward Ladar. The fencing master spat on the clearing's short grass and motioned for the White Star Jaren to retire to

the edge of the clearing. Turning to face us, Ladar sneered. "The blood of the Shikazu curdles at the thought of this Jaren calling itself 'Shikazu'." Ladar's black eyes flashed as he swaggered to stand in front of me. "I cannot understand why this Jaren hasn't dropped this pitiful tree lizard. And you three," he swept his hand at Gem, Dob and Tim, "you should be pulling plows, such hulking, clumsy lumps." He faced Vastar. "How can you bear the shame of keeping this disgraceful Jaren together? Have you no pride?"

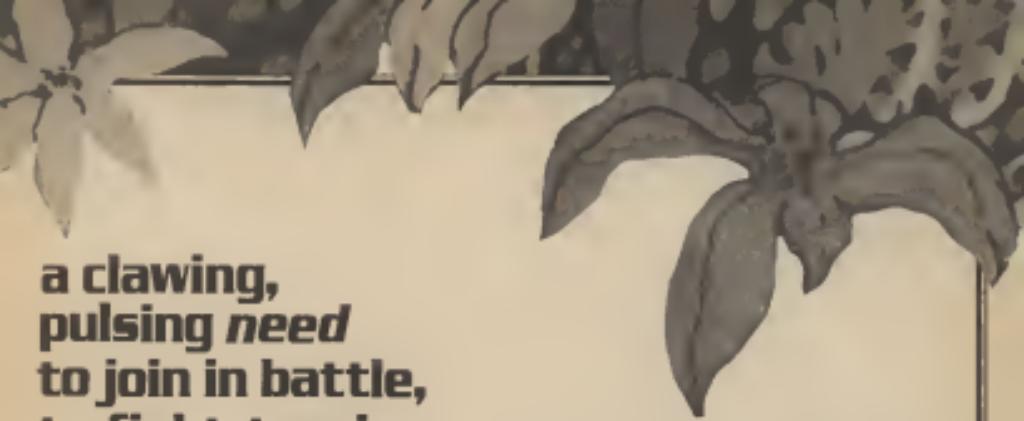
Vastar lifted his head, his blond mane held in place by a red band, and smiled at the fencing master. Our *Di* lifted his wand, ejected its energy shield, and held the weapon under Ladar's nose. "Pick your mates, old man. The Redbar is past suffering the senile jabberings of an aging tree toad." Dob, Gem, Tim, and I hefted our wands and ejected the energy shields. The wands would still be at low output, but without the shields, the burns would be deep and possibly deadly. Vastar had challenged Ladar to the *varada*, the Jaren duel whose winners would be those left standing. There is no first burn and bows with the *varada*. Instead, the combatant fights until he either wins or can fight no longer.

Ladar tossed back his head and laughed. "Mates? I need no mates to spread this Jaren all over the drill ground. I could throw my wand away, take a switch off a tree and whip the five of you."

Vastar folded his arms, snorted and said in an almost bored voice. "Pick your mates, Ladar, or retire from the field. We have had enough hot air."

The rest of the Redbar laughed. As Ladar narrowed his eyes, nodded, and walked to the edge of the clearing to fill out a combat team of five,

**I felt the
BATTLE BLOOD
in my veins for
the first time:**



a clawing, pulsing *need* to join in battle, to fight, to win.

I felt no doubt about our victory; we were the Jaren of the Redbar; we were Shikazu. I looked at my mates and saw the same blood pounding through their veins, narrowed eyes, teeth showing through tightly drawn lips of brown.

With his wand, Lodar picked out four *kurachis* and motioned them to the center of the clearing. All four were *Di* of their respective Jaren, and known to us all as excellent fighters. Lodar's group squared off with the Redbar, ejected their energy shields and bowed. The Redbar returned the bow and came up at the ready. Lodar spat out the command: "Begin!"

My opponent, the *Di* of the Black Sword Jaren, sidestepped and brought his wand down in a diagonal slash. Without thinking, I instinctively reacted with the trick Vastar had perfected and that we had practiced until the drill was more familiar to us than our names. Squeezing the shaft of my wand, I directed a pulse to the edge of my opponent's deflection shield at the same time I moved from the path of his slash. The force of the beam on his shield caused him to tip off balance the least bit, and as he brought his wand arm up to counter, my wand seared the underside of his arm. In a flash, he brought his shield around, but the damage had been done and he was on the defensive. I laid my wand across his knees, and he began lashing out wildly with his own wand. His eyes were wild as I deflected his attack, then let my wand linger on his left foot. He went down on his left knee, covering himself almost completely with his shield; his ill-directed wand denuding the *yonna* plants behind me. A flash of brown, and I roosted the edge of his shoulder. His shield went up to cover, and my wand burned into his right foot. As his wand went up, I ran forward and kicked his shield with my foot, sending him sprawling on his back. In less time than it took his shield to sail to the ground, my knee was planted in his chest and my de-energized wand was at his throat. With my

shield I came down upon his wand hand, then brought my knee up under his chin. I backed off at the ready, but the *Di* of the Black Sword lay motionless save the heaving of his chest. I turned to aid my mates, but they were waiting for me; Gem and Tim rested with their arms on Deb's shoulders, while Vastar stood above Lodar, our *Di*'s eyes wild with triumph. Lodar pushed himself to a sitting position while the four of us gathered behind Vastar. Our *Di* looked down at the fencing master. "There will be no more abuse, Lodar, and the Redbar will come and go to drill as it chooses." Lodar nodded and we left the field, shouting and punching each other, looking for some way to work off the pressure we still had inside of us. I glanced back to look once more upon our field of victory and saw Lodar standing in its center, hands on his hips, smile wrinkling his face and hot pride burning in his eyes. Since we were the victors, the look confused me. Years later it dawned on me that Lodar's occupation was taking babies and turning them into highly skilled fighters. The Jaren of the Redbar was not the only victor that day.

It was not long after that the Jarens of our parents offered us up for adulthood. My father's Jaren, that of the Ice Flower, and my mother's Jaren, that of the Silver Bird, stood with me before the Light.

When I was but a *tikiruch*, I had feared this test of the Light. But that was when I was a *tikiruch*. As we walked the path to the temple, in my heart I was Shikazu. I feared nothing, and felt confident the Light would serve me, not destroy me. The procession entered the rough stone structure, and inside it was but native rock for a floor. In the center of the structure, an outcropping protruded, and was capped by a carved rock shell. Great chains were attached to the shell and led to the roof, then down again. I stood with my mates around the shell, while the Jarens of our parents hefted the chains and be-





gan pulling

My mates and I joined hands as the chain's slack was taken up. The shell began to rise, and a blinding blue light filled the temple. Higher rose the shell, until it dangled over our heads. I looked toward the light and saw its pulsing shimmer. Throughout the planet Tenuet ran this substance that bound together the Shikazu. Wherever it broke through the surface, the Shikazu covered it with a temple, then brought its best to stand the test of adulthood.

Still holding hands, we knelt before the Light, moved our clasped hands forward, and touched it. Had we been but four, we would have died. Had we been more than five, there would have been nothing. But, we were five, and the Light fused us into one. As its power flowed through us, our Jaren became as the fingers on a single hand, while, in turn, our Jaren became a part of the Shikazu. As we touched the Light, I could *feel* the thoughts of my mates, as they could feel mine. More than that, I could feel us all being filled with the warrior blood, and the mission to defend Tenuet, and the Light,

for without the Light, we became nothing.

Apher of the Black Pike Jaren, Vastar's father, called forth from his place at the chains the first stanza of the *Rhonakah*—the service of the Light. "And now you are one in life, as you shall one day be one in death."

The five of us answered. "For we are Shikazu."

Gem's father called forth next, followed by each male parent in turn. "The Light you touch now shall remain with you each, until the last of your Jaren meets the long sleep."

"For we are Shikazu, the Light is ours."

"Witness the power of the Light, and know what you are."

"We are Shikazu; we cannot be conquered."

"You are bound now to the Shikazu, our honor is as your own."

"We are Shikazu; and shall serve no other race."

"Stand, then, Shikazu; stand, Jaren of the Redbar."

We stood, let our hands fall to our sides, and watched as our parents' Jaren lowered the rock shell over the light. The shell in place, there was a moment of quiet; then our parents' Jaren rushed to us, grinning, laughing, cheering, pummeling our backs, then presenting us each with the forest-green robe—the robes of adulthood.

All of the Redbar donned the full-dress robe that night, and the next morning we lounged next to our waterhole near the Gnawi discussing our futures. We had long since chased the female Jaren from the area, and in fact we ruled supreme in the village of Ahrm. "We are too big for Ahrm," as Dob observed.

Tim played on his pipes, then fingered the green of his robe. "We have yet to exploit adulthood here in the village. There are females to be learned, councils to attend, and pleasures to experience. Let us at least wrinkle our robes before we seek the road."

Gem sat up, crossed his legs and held out his hands. "Brothers, why do we not place our Jaren at the disposal of the Shikazu Infantry? They would beg to have us in their ranks, and the promise of action is there. A race challenges our territories toward the galactic center side of the four stars." Gem turned the spit on the four-legged so we'd caught.

Dob nodded. "Aye, the humans."

Tim replaced the pipes in his robe, then scratched his chin. "What are they like?" He sniffed at the cooking so.

"Like us. They come from the same stock, but they are smaller and have many colors."

Tim looked thoughtful. "How do they fight?" Dob only shrugged. "Vastar?"

Our *Ds* lay flat on his back, watching through the treetops at the clouds. He closed his eyes, shook his head, then went back to looking at the clouds. "I know nothing of the humans, except that they control many worlds and would have ours as well." We all laughed, since nothing had ever sounded as absurd as this alleged human goal. No race takes from the Shikazu and lives to recount the experience. Vastar rolled his head in my direction. "What about you, Eola? Are you finding the borders of Ahrm confining?"

I shrugged. "I go with my Jaren."

"What about the female? What's her name?"

I flushed. After we had squared off again at the waterhole with the female Jaren, that of the Golden Dart, I had begun seeing Carrina, the female that had first beaten me, but then had fallen to my wand. Neither my Jaren nor she understood why the scars I had caused her gave me pain. But all the same, she let me kiss and caress them. "Her name is Carrina," I added a stick to the small fire.

"Carrina." Vastar repeated. "The Golden Dart is already a respected Jaren. Do you think our mothers' Jaren would approve?"

I looked down and picked at my toenails. "I know not. But it is no matter. The Golden Dart is sworn to enter the army! She must follow her Jaren as I

must follow mine." I smiled. "And I doubt that my brothers of the Redbar are agreeable to settling down to wife, home, and brat at this early time—and neither am I."

Dob reached over a thigh-sized hand and clapped me on the shoulder. It was only by the grace of that shoulder having filled out with muscle over the years since the Jaren was formed that I was saved. "Aye, Eoola, we must seek our fortunes—adventure!" He turned to Vastar. "I have heard the humans take mates at will, at any time, and without ceremony; that they act love without love, and without pledges of honor. Is this true?"

Vastar nodded as he sprang to his feet, then crouched before the fire. He ripped a still bloody limb from the az, tore at it with his teeth and wiped the grease from his hands upon his dusty fest. He looked at us all as he spoke around the mouthful of bloody meat. "They are animals."

That day beside the waters of the Gnawi, we decided to strike out on the trail toward Meydal the next morning to see some of the sights. I had never been beyond the limits of Ahrm, and long before the sun chased the shadows from the sky, I was up, waiting impatiently by the dying coals of the meeting fire. I had a small shoulder pack filled with food and things I would need for travel. My shield was slung, and at my waist my wand dangled where it would be handy. As I waited, the smells of the village—the fire, the dust, the life-smell of fat orchids in the jungle—began tugging at my heart. This was my only home. As I knelt on the hard packed soil of the meeting place, I pulled the short-knife my father had given me the night before from my sash. I forced the blade into the dirt, and as I dug, Dob walked up beside me, knelt and began digging. He smiled at me as we completed our holes. We each took our knives, cut off locks of hair and buried them in the holes. Even if we died, our spirits would come back to Ahrm to reclaim their own. It was a child's fable, and I would have felt foolish had not Dob joined me in my childish ritual.

We heard a snort behind us and we stood to see Vastar, Gem, and Tim, packs on shoulders, shields on backs, standing together looking at us. Vastar held out a hand toward the burying place. "Are we *ukirach* to be planting hair?" Dob and I were speechless, caught as we were by our brothers. Then Vastar laughed, and the three of them pulled knives, knelt and planted their own. Moments later, my brothers and I left the dim glow of the meeting fire, walked the dusty paths of Ahrm and entered the blackness of the jungle trail. In the east, the shadows were beginning to give back the sun.

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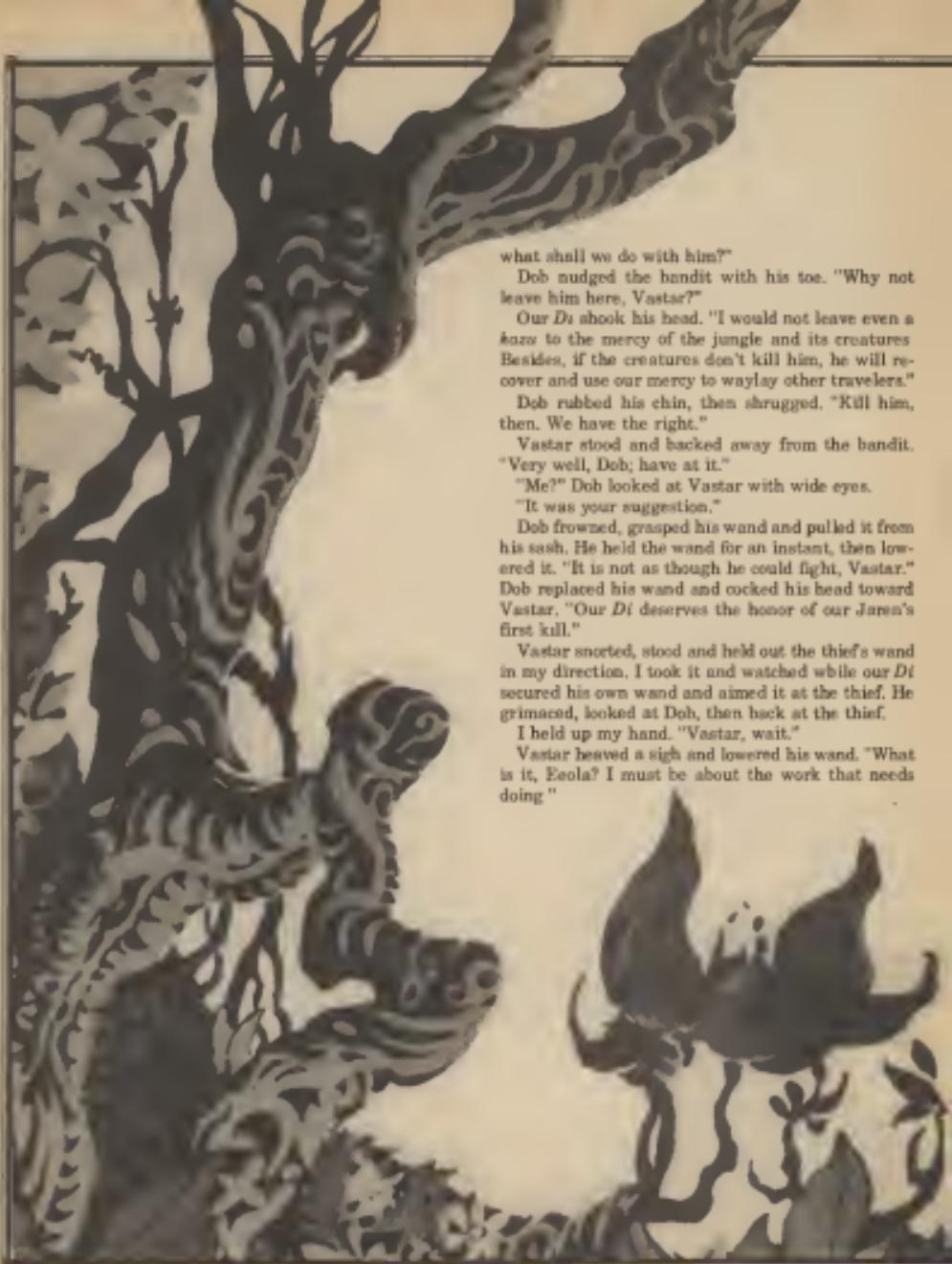
e walked in single-file with Vastar in the lead. Although we fairly exploded to laugh and rough around at the beginning of our adventure, we maintained silence and kept our eyes on the jungle, for we were not *ukirach* to be surprised by bandit Jarens or bands of starving *kozus*. Many times we passed Jarens walking in the other direction, and each time we raised our wand hands when they did and placed them across our breasts. As they passed, Vastar would bow his head to the other *Dr* who would, in turn, bow his or hers. As the last one in our procession, I would keep watch on the passing Jaren until it went out of sight, while the last one in the passing file kept a watch on the Redbar. There were lone travelers, too, and on these we kept a careful eye. They could be parts of Jarens, but more often than not they would be *kozus* turned to waylaying their betters for food and weapons. When these passed, we would draw our wand arms across our breasts, but Vastar would not bow.

We walked all that morning, keeping a strong pace, and had entered a district where the *zabs* worn by the Jarens were brown, when a lone traveler wearing a leather shirt and black & half-dress approached from the other direction. The wand side, his left, was clear, but we kept our eyes on him as he came near. When he came up next to Vastar, a wand came up in the fellow's right hand. Our wand hands were across our breasts, and there was nothing Vastar could do. But standing behind Dob's bulk, the leather-shirted creature could not see my right hand speed to my sash, take my new knife from it and hurl it past Dob's shoulder at the fellow's head. It was a new knife, and I was not yet familiar with its balance. Instead of the blade sinking into the thief's brain, the hilt struck him on the forehead, splitting the skin. As the thief's lamps went out, he sank to the path. As he hit, we heard scampering feet and rustling leaves in the jungle around us. The fellow's companions appeared to have no desire to tangle with the Redbar.

While I retrieved my blade, Vastar stooped over the bandit and plucked the wand from the fellow's hand. Looking up, he nodded at Tim and Gem. "Keep a watch on the jungle. All of this creature's band may not have taken to the bush." Vastar looked at me as I tucked my knife into my sash. "You spared this bandit, Eoola, and he still lives. What do you suggest we do with him?"

I shrugged. "My mercy was unintentional, Vastar. It was my new knife who spared the scum."

Vastar frowned. "If you intend to keep your hair, Eoola, you must bend your new blade to your will." I nodded. Vastar turned back to the bandit. "Still,



what shall we do with him?"

Dob nudged the bandit with his toe. "Why not leave him here, Vastar?"

Our *Di* shook his head. "I would not leave even a *koz* to the mercy of the jungle and its creatures. Besides, if the creatures don't kill him, he will recover and use our mercy to waylay other travelers."

Dob rubbed his chin, then shrugged. "Kill him, then. We have the right."

Vastar stood and backed away from the bandit. "Very well, Dob; have at it."

"Me?" Dob looked at Vastar with wide eyes.

"It was your suggestion."

Dob frowned, grasped his wand and pulled it from his sash. He held the wand for an instant, then lowered it. "It is not as though he could fight, Vastar." Dob replaced his wand and cocked his head toward Vastar. "Our *Di* deserves the honor of our Jaren's first kill."

Vastar snorted, stood and held out the thief's wand in my direction. I took it and watched while our *Di* secured his own wand and aimed it at the thief. He grimaced, looked at Dob, then back at the thief.

I held up my hand. "Vastar, wait."

Vastar heaved a sigh and lowered his wand. "What is it, Eeola? I must be about the work that needs doing."

I held the thief's wand out to him. "Look. It has no power, and the jewel is shattered. If he was out to kill us, it was not with that."

Vastar took the wand, aimed it at an empty spot in the trail and pressed the handle. Nothing. "It is true."

Dob nudged the thief, again with his toe. "Attacking a wounded Jaren with nothing but wit and a lifeless stick bespeaks of no little courage, Vastar."

Vastar shook his head. "The courage of a bandit." He threw up his hands. "Now what do we do with him?"

The thief moaned, opened his eyes and looked at our faces. "I live?"

Vastar threw the dead wand on the bandit's chest. "We will probably live to regret it. What is your name, thief?"

The bandit sat up, holding his bend as though it were a sack of shattered glass. "A moment, my benefactors, while I calm the whistles between my ears." After a moment, he lowered his hands to his lap and raised a shaggy grey eyebrow in my direction. "You, small one; is it your skill I should be thankful for or your ineptitude?"

I paled the knife from my sash, flipped it and caught it by the blade. "Perhaps we can judge this properly if I make another throw."

The bandit grinned through his stubble of grey whiskers and held up a hand. "No offense, lad. I but asked a simple question."

Vastar snapped his fingers. "Old bandit. Your name."

"I am called Krogar by my friends."

"What do the rest of us call you?"

Krogar shrugged. "You hold the wands; you may call me anything you wish." The bandit pushed himself to his feet, stood weaving for a moment, then looked at our faces, stopping on Vastar. "Well?"

"Well, what, thief?"

"Am I to be spared or not? If I am, I'm sure we both have better things to do than standing here. You must be on your way, and I must make my living." Krogar shrugged and looked down. "If I'm not to live, then be done with the task and end this cursed headache that threatens to open the top of my skull."

Despite ourselves, we could but laugh at the old fellow's crust. Vastar looked at us, then waved a

hand at the old bandit. "Keep your miserable life and your aching head, Krogar. But beware of this Jaren should we pass this way again." Vastar motioned to us and we fell in line and continued down the trail. I turned once to look back at Krogar, but the trail was empty.

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For days we walked the trail, putting up nights in strange villages. At their meeting fires we would relate the news we had come across and the villagers would tell us things they'd picked up from other travelers. Often there would be one or more other travelers at the fire, and it was from one of these that we heard of the human conquest of the planet Baalphor. The traveler had come from a town on the edge of the city of Meydal where the terrible news still ran hot through the streets. "The Jarens of Meydal and surrounding towns are entering the army in droves." The fellow scratched beneath his maroon robe, then pointed in the direction we had come from. "I travel to my village of Tdast to gather up my Jaren. We will return to Meydal and enter."

Vastar snapped a stick he had been toying with, then threw the two pieces into the fire. His eyes blazed in the red light of the fire as he turned to the traveler. "I cannot believe Baalphor has fallen—not to humans."

The traveler shrugged. "They are numerous, and they have great, powerful weapons, as well as skill in their use."

Vastar made fists with his hands and shook them. "But they are not Shikazu! Do you tell me the Shikazu have been conquered?"

"No. The Shikazu will remain unconquered until the last of us lays down the wand. The garrison on Baalphor has been destroyed, but even now I suspect the army is preparing to drive the humans off the planet."

Dob snorted and raised his brows in a show of contempt. "Vastar, the army will probably drive the scum from Baalphor long before we can reach the streets of Meydal."

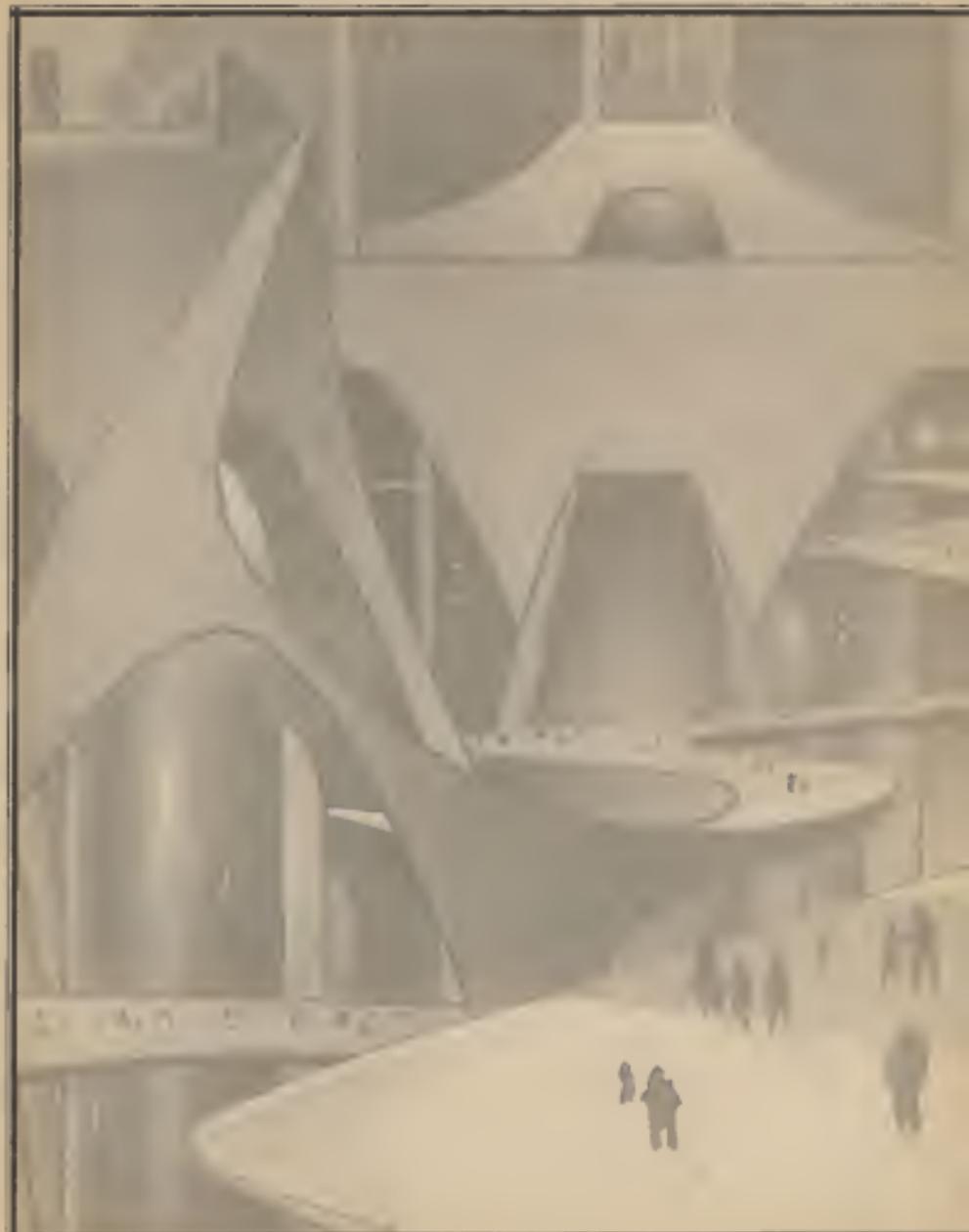
The traveler shook his head. "I fear not, my gross friend. Many new ghosts shall walk before Baalphor falls. The Shikazu controls few planets compared to the humans."

"How many do the humans hold?" I asked.

"Over two hundred. We cannot be beaten, for we are the Shikazu; but there will be a price."

The Shikazu's empire of nine planets had been difficult to imagine; at least, for one who had never been outside of Ahrm. An empire of two hundred planets—it was beyond imagination. I think I felt, at that moment, a touch of fear.





The next morning, we pointed our toes at Meydal to be sworn to the military. Our blood, the blood of the Shikazu, was up and boiling. In time, the trail widened and we came upon motor carts, as well as more travelers. The closer we came to the city, the wider and more congested the road became. Soon, the road was hard-surfaced and traveled only by sleek, many-colored crafts that would whiz by, blowing the heat and dust from the road over us. The villages we traveled through were constructed of stone, metal, and glass, while the villagers strutted upon upraised paths of stone wearing robe that fought the eye for belief metal gold, deep crimson stitched with silver, loud pinks, and stripes of every description. Next to the raised walks, merchants shouted of their wares amidst the bustle, and soon the human hordes were forgotten as the five villagers of Ahru drank in this new world of flash and glitter. In the town of Adalone, we walked one of the upraised paths around a flowered hill upon which stood a grand house of smooth white pillars and arches, then stopped as though stunned as the main street of the town spread before us. The size of the buildings! The crowds!

Suddenly Vastar's angry face cut off my view. "Look at you! Mouths hanging open, eyes bugged! Get the straw out of your ears! Do you want these villagers to think we're unsophisticated?" I looked at the others and realized that our *Di* had not singled

me out, but was lashing all of us. He turned and pointed down the street. "There is a station. We need not go on to Meydal."

I followed the direction of his finger and saw the crossed pikes that symbolized the army standing out from the wall of a tall silver and glass building. I tugged at Vastar's robe. "If this is only a town, Vastar, what could Meydal be like?"

Vastar shook his head. "We are here to enter the army; not to see the sights. This is a station, and we can be in service all the sooner."

Dob gained control of his gaping mouth long enough to comment upon Vastar's reasoning. "We will still be sent to the main station in Meydal, will we not? We will be sworn no faster, then, if we travel to Meydal and seek a station."

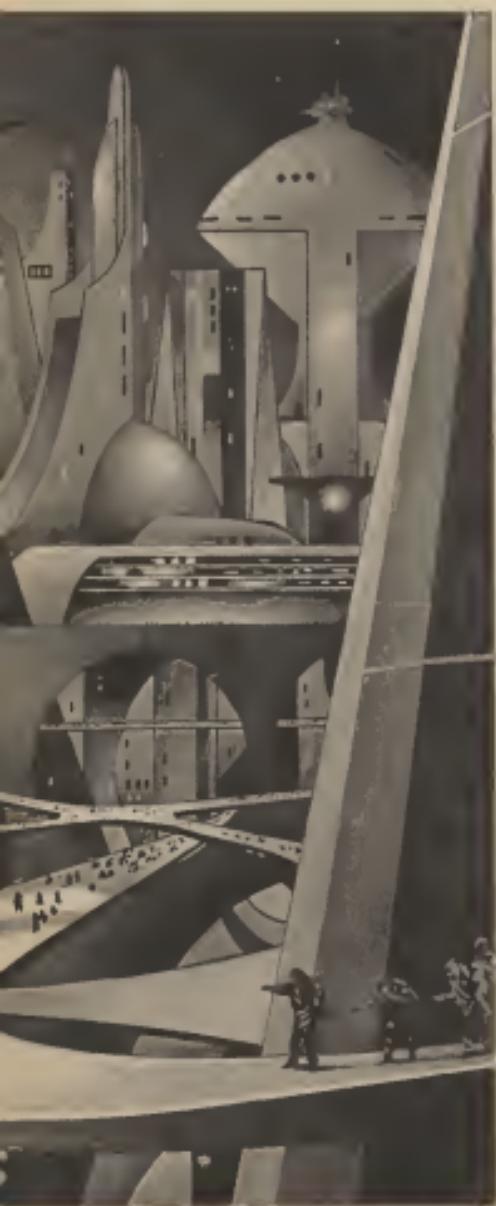
Vastar raised an eyebrow. "Gem, what say you?"

Gem shrugged. "I would see a little of this city before we are sworn."

There was no need to ask Timbenevva; his drooling tongue almost hung to the walk. Vastar's head gave a curt nod. "Very well, we shall see Meydal, but can we at least inquire at the station here about directions? All of these roads, streets, and side streets are beginning to confuse me."

We stepped off, gawking at the buildings and people, our attention so absorbed that had we been attacked by two crippled, half-witted *tikruch*, I doubt that victory would have fallen to the Redbar.





Compared to the city of Meydal, the town of Adelone that had stunned us with its grandeur was but a mud wallow. The army officer at the Adelone station had given us transportation passes, and told us we could report to one of the stations in Meydal—this, of course, after signing us up. We had two days to ourselves before reporting. The officer walked us to the pneumo station in the town, and put us on one of the cars. Moments after we lowered ourselves into the plush seats, the car shot along a tube much like a bullet through a blowpipe. Before we had really settled in, a voice from the brightly lit overhead barked at us. We were in Meydal.

As we stepped from the car onto a platform, we simply gawked. Passengers trying to disembarke behind us shoved us rudely out of the way, but we hardly noticed. Like a forest of giant sword ferns, Meydal's incredible buildings towered above us. When we walked to the eniled edge of the platform to have a better view, we backed away as we realized the platform was suspended high above the ground. We inched back and saw that the buildings extended below the platform just as far as they rose above it. Dob shook his head and laughed so hard he could not stop.

"What amuses you, brother?" I asked.

Dob waved his hand up and down at the magnifcent spires of Meydal. "Do you remember how they marveled in Ahrm when my father built a hut with a loft above it, and how afraid I was to be up so high?" He laughed again, and I joined him. It was an overwhelming sight, and I believe we would be gawking there yet had not Larenz come along.

"Seeing the sights before entering the army, jungle cousins?" We turned to see a tall, black-maned fellow decked in crimson robe embroidered along the edges with geometric shapes in gold thread.

Vastar cocked his head at us and spoke to the stranger. "We have already entered. We must report the morning of the day after tomorrow. Who might you be?"

The fellow in red bowed. "Please excuse my thoughtlessness. I am Larenz, *Di* of the Jaren of the Red Claw. Meydal is my city."

Vastar nodded. "We are the Jaren of the Redbar from Ahrm." At Larenz's pazzied expression, Vastar shrugged. "It is a village far to the south." Our *Di* introduced himself and the rest of us to Larenz.

The stranger smiled at us with a display of beautiful straight teeth that contrasted sharply with the

dark brown of his face. "Excellent. I am to report at the same time with my Jaren. Do you know someone in Meydal?"

Vastar frowned. "Why?"

"If you don't, I would be happy to show you the city. If you don't know your way around, you'll miss most of it."

Vastar turned to consult with us, bounced a single gaze off of our eager faces, then turned back to Larenz. "Very well, Larenz. We accept your invitation."

"Excellent. Then, cousins, be kind enough to follow me." Larenz turned and led us off the platform, through a glass door that opened without touching, then into a small box that dropped out from underneath us, disgorging us below at street level. All during our fall to the street, I mulled over the reasons I could think of for this apparent kindness from a stranger, and decided to keep my wand arm limber.

Using our army transportation passes, Larenz of the Red Claw led our Jaren through a maze of tubes and connections, stopping here and there to witness sights he thought would interest us. Of all the sights, the squat sprawl of the government district, with broad, tree-lined streets and gleaming white metal and glass above smooth, well-tended lawns, impressed me the most. But between that and the park, the choice was hard—and the business buildings! The walks choked with bustling adults and children, the streets jammed with sleek, dark vehicles. Meydal was, in truth, a city of wonders.

Even so, as my neck began aching at looking up at the buildings and my feet tired at being slapped upon the hard walks, my interest began flagging. It was at that point I noticed a curious thing: the citizens of Meydal carried neither shields nor wands. Here and there would be an individual properly armed, but his or her *nabe* branded the person as being out of the jungle as was the Redbar. Those decked in the garish finery I had come to associate with Meydalian were unarmed. At one point in our travels, I found Larenz walking beside me, and asked him about this curious fact.

He laughed. "There is no need for arms in Meydal. Do you see slavering beasts crouching on the building ledges, or lurking in doorways?" He laughed again. "The jungle is a long way off, cousin."

I pointed at a few of the people passing in the other direction. "I see the most dangerous beast of all here, and in great numbers."

Larenz halted, stood on his toes and looked over the heads of the crowd on the walk. "You can never find one when you need . . . there!" He pointed. "Do you see the fellow in black robe with the red stitching?"

"The one with the club?"

"Aye. It is his job, Eoola, to keep the citizens of Meydal from each other's throats—and purses." We turned and walked quickly to catch up with the others. "He is a member of a Jaren sworn to the police."

I shrugged. "I would not be comfortable leaving my protection to others, Larenz."

"It is our way, Eoola, and it works well enough. There is no need to go armed in Meydal, except, perhaps, in the Human Quarter."

My eyes went wide. "Humans? Here on Tenast?"

"Why, of course. There are many, many races in Meydal, including humans. Quite a number, too."

"But, Larenz, we are at war . . ."

He waved his hand. "We are at war with a government, Eoola, not a race. Everyone in the Human Quarter is a citizen of Tenast, as are you and I."

"But . . . they are not Shikazu!"

"No, they are not Shikazu. Would you and your mates like to see the Human Quarter?"

My face felt drained of blood. I nodded and turned to ask the others, but they had been listening. Vastar nodded. "Show the way, Larenz. We would see your housebroken humans."

As filth-covered, gnarled roots are part of a beautiful flower, the Human Quarter was a part of Meydal. In a haze, my mind recalls low, red-black row dwellings, narrow, refuse-strewn streets, strange music and hostile glances. The humans, pink, grey, yellowish, copper, and a few who could almost pass as Shikazu, except for their strange fuzzy hair, moved from the walks as we approached keeping their eyes down, hands shoved into openings in the leg coverings they wore. Females hung from windows in the evil-smelling structures, chattering and shouting among themselves. Many younger humans sat on steps leading to entrances, while others stood along the walk in small groups, laughing and talking. Old ones stared blankly from open windows, seeing nothing.

I turned to Larenz. "Why, Larenz? Why do they live in this manner?"

Larenz only shrugged. "It is their way."

I snickered. "This is the race that rules two hundred worlds?" The others laughed. A group of young male humans turned at the sounds of the laughter and glowered at us.

Larenz waved his hand at the street. "These are not the only humans on Tenast, Eoola. There are many in rich homes here in Meydal. But every city of the nine worlds has a human quarter that looks much as this one does. My only explanation is that they are not Shikazu."

The group of male humans spread out across the walk in front of us. My eyes quickly noted that Lar-

enz and my mates were the only Shikazu within sight. Several of the humans pulled knives or wands from garish-looking shirts, while, two and three at a time, other humans joined their ranks, carrying wands, knives, lengths of pipe, and chain. My fingers stole around the handle of my wand.

A tall human, yellow with slanting eyes, stood above the others and in front of them. He threw up his head. "Looks like Baelphor hasn't taught the Shikkies anything."

Larenz waved his hand. "Stand out of the walk and let us pass."

The human spat on the walk. "And if we don't, Shikki?"

Larenz laughed. "Why, we'll burn a path through the middle of you. Now, stand aside."

One of them from the end called, "Ay, shikkishik-kishikki!"

A wand came up, and in the flash of an eye, Vastar burned it from the human's hand. The Redbar unslung its shields and stood at the ready. The yellow human held up his hands and shook his head. "Hey, shikki, we were just having a little fun. Ease off."

Vastar, his eyes bright with blood, dropped his shield a bit and lowered his wand. At that moment, a whirling length of chain sailed through the air at him. Vastar knocked it to the ground with his shield and screamed "Shikazu!" He brought his wand across the chests of the front rank of humans and they dropped to the walk. The rest of us waded in, cutting and burning, the smell of roasted flesh strong in the air. Larenz picked a fallen wand from the walk and joined us, burning the scum with a skill the Redbar had rarely seen outside of its own performances. After only a few moments, the street animals broke and ran. I counted fifteen of the humans left on the walk by the time the police came. The females had stopped their chattering and were looking down upon us, their faces twisted with hate, some with grief. But the old ones still stared through their windows, seeing nothing.

The police were numerous, and upon Larenz's advice, we surrendered our wands and shields to them. Other than those groaning on the walk, few of the humans were gathered up and placed in the holding cell with us. Larenz and Vastar explained that we must report soon to the army, but the police said there was nothing to be done about it. It would take all of five days to process us, get our statements and stand the hearing that would determine if we would have to stand trial. The holding cell was an enormous room, windowless and dark, which reflected our gloomy spirits. We had given our oaths to the army, but there seemed no way to abide by our word. Several times Vastar spoke sharply to

Larenz. "A fine guide you are! Would you like to see the Human Quarter?" he says! Vastar swept his arm at the few Shikazu and numerous humans in the cell. "Well, Larenz, we are in the Human Quarter. What now?" He sat on the cell floor with a thump, next to Dob.

Larenz, seated on the floor, leaned back against the cell wall, and stared at the humans seated in the opposite corner of the room. "I had not planned this, Vastar."

Vastar snorted.

"I suppose it is nothing to you, but we of Ahrm are honor bound to keep our oaths."

Larenz's eyes flashed at our *Di*. "The oath is no less sacred to a Meydalian, jungle runner!" He started up, but Dob's huge hand found Larenz's shoulder and held him to the floor.

Dob smiled. "Larenz, I would like to know why you singled us out on the platform. Why did we become the object of your generosity?"

Larenz's eyes went from one to the other of us, then he shrugged with his unclumped shoulder. "My *Jaren* reports soon to the army, as you know."

"As we know."

"My father's *Jaren* officers the Army of the Fourth Star. I have studied at the *Den-kirach*, the military school, and after training, My *Jaren* shall officer an infantry group. Meydalians are good fighters—some say, none better. But my father always speaks well of our jungle cousins. He advised me to put as many jungle *Jaren*s into my group as I could get to join."

Dob nodded. "And, you would have us join your group when it is formed?"

"Yes."

Dob nodded again. "Truly a great honor, Larenz. I have a question—a matter that needs clearing up."

"What is that?"

Dob held his hands up indicating the cell. "The first thing that happened to the *Jaren* of the Redbar under your skilled leadership is that it was thrown into prison. If we join you, do you then lead us to the penal colony, or perhaps the execution block?"

The rest of us snickered. Larenz grimaced, then shook his head. "I had no reason to expect the humans to attack us here on the streets of Meydal. It has never happened before."

A human on the other side of the cell stood and

shouted. "You shikkies clammitt! Some of us want to sleep."

As the human returned to his place, Vastar began getting to his feet. Dob's other meaty hand clamped our *Di* to the hard floor. "There must be thirty of them, Vastar. If you order it, I will happily join your attack, but it seems to me that we are already in enough trouble."

"They forget their place!"

Dob nodded. "But you forget our place." He nodded again at the cell walls.

Vastar shook his head. "We have given our word to the Army!"

A shadowy figure seated in a corner away from both the humans and our group, stood, scratched itself and shambled across the floor to stand in front of Vastar. It laughed. "Well, well. My ears spoke truly. It is my benefactor from the trail south of Laronan." He turned to me. "We meet again, skull-cracker."

I squinted in the poor light. "Krogar? It is you?"

Vastar snorted. "What do you want, *kozu*? Another crack on the head?"

Krogar squatted and pointed a finger at Vastar's chest. "I am no *kozu*, young one. Although I am alone and work the trails for a living, I am of a Sarut, that of the Green Dragon of the Village of Sarut."

Vastar raised an eyebrow. "Then where are your mates?"

Krogar looked at the cell floor, then back at Vastar. "They are ashes mixed with those of the defenders of Dushik. We were part of the force that secured the ninth planet for the Shikazu."

"You were in the army?"

"I think I already answered that."

Vastar threw up a hand, then let it fall back into his lap. "If you are Shikazu, and once of the army, why are you a thief? Why do you prey on Shikazu?"

I could not see Krogar's face, but a strange quality came into his voice—an empty, lost sound. "My Jaren was almost twenty years old when my mates walked as ghosts. It works on you in a way I hope you never have an opportunity to understand." Krogar waved his hand, dismissing the subject. "From the conversation I overheard, I detect a desire to quit these walls. Why are you here?"

Vastar pointed at the humans on the other side of the cell. "They attacked us. We will be set free after the hearing, but that means we will miss our reporting time."

Krogar looked over our faces and stopped on Larenz. "You have picked up a new companion."

Larenz returned Krogar's look. "I am Larenz of the Red Claw Jaren, here in Meydal. I too will miss my reporting time."

Krogar rubbed his chin. "Larenz . . . does not your father's Jaren officer the Fourth Army?"

"Yes."

"I suppose your father might look with favor, in a pecuniary fashion, upon one who rescued his son from this disgrace."

Larenz laughed. "It would appear, Krogar, that your position is no more mobile than ours."

Krogar stood, turned toward the humans and shouted: "Jailer, get these foul-smelling creatures out of our cell! Shikazu cannot be forced to share cells with such animals!" The humans began grumbling, and several got to their feet and began approaching Krogar. The thief turned back to us and grinned. "In confusion there is profit." He turned back to the humans, adopted a fighting stance, then rushed headlong into them, knocking four of them to the floor in a tangle of legs and arms.

Larenz and Vastar both stood at the same time and yelled

"Shikazu!"

We all came to our feet, as did the humans, then closed battle in the center of the floor. A human rushed at me, fists swinging, but I sidestepped his attack and brought up my knee into his stomach. While I grappled with a second, a third planted a fist in my eye. I'm not sure, I didn't take the time to examine him, but I think I broke his neck. In a moment, I was buried under a mountain of cursing bodies. A moment later, I felt the bodies being plucked from me, then saw Dob—a human clutching to his back and one hanging from each leg, picking up my attackers by neck and drawers and flinging them across the cell.

Whistles shrieked, the cell door flew open, and four armed police entered. They carried clubs which they soon brought to bear upon the heads of the humans. In a moment, the full fury of the humans was concentrated upon the police, while Krogar, Larenz and the Redbar separated and went for the open door. Standing in the doorway, another of the police spied Krogar and lifted his club. Krogar shrugged as if to say "I cannot be blamed for trying," then he half-turned away, turned back in a flash and caught the fellow with a foot in the stomach.

The seven of us rushed through the door and over the downed police into the corridor. Krogar waved, turned right and ran. We followed until we saw two more officers rushing in the opposite direction. These two hefted wands, rather than clubs, but Krogar did not hesitate for an instant. I saw him take a burst in the chest just as he leaped into the air to fall against the two police, knocking them to the floor. Gern reached to pick up one of the fallen officer's

wands, but Krogar knocked Gem's hand away. "No! If we kill a police, they will never rest until they find us. Leave it." Krogar opened his leather shirt, looked at the ugly burn on his chest, then waved us on. I turned back and saw the corridor choked with police. Most went into the cell we vacated, but eight of them, armed with wands, came our way.

We pounded down the corridor, wand beams flashing about our heads and off the walls. We turned a corner, ran over a guard positioned there, and piled into an elevator. Krogar grabbed the control and the floor dropped out from beneath me. He cocked his head toward the door. "Be prepared to charge when it opens; they will be waiting for us."

Krogar brought the car to a sudden stop, pulled open the door, and joined us in our battle cry as we charged into the lobby of the police building. "Shikazu?" We stumbled into each other as those in front saw first that no one was waiting for us. A receptionist seated behind a counter next to the elevator looked at us with a puzzled expression. Krogar laughed, then began walking toward the door.

The receptionist stood. "One moment..."

A clangor sound filled the lobby, and we could see massive shutters slowly closing over the doors to the street. Krogar broke, ran and dived under a shutter, while the rest of us dived under other door shutters. Rolling on the walk outside the police building, I looked around and saw that we had all made it. Still, it would not be safe to linger out on the street for too long. Soon, police cruisers would arrive. Larenz turned to Krogar. "Where now?"

"To your father's house, that I might collect my reward."

Dikahn of the Blue Cloud Jaren, Lord General of the Army of the Fourth Star, and father of Larenz, reclined on his couch as Larenz recounted the history of the past few hours. Krogar stood at his side while the rest of us stood in a row behind them. Aside from the occasion, I was stunned at the grandeur of Dikahn's home. The one room we were in could fit over six of the huts entire families occupied in Ahrm. Dikahn himself was dressed in silver robe and wore a bright red sash encrusted with medals. His black mane was shot with silver, and his black eyes, set in an impassive face as though they were jewels mounted in stone, studied his son. As Larenz finished, Dikahn turned toward Krogar. "You say you were once in the army?"

Krogar bowed. "Yes, Lord General. My Jaren served you in the capture of Dashik more than fifteen years ago."

Dikahn nodded, then turned toward Larenz. "You are an adult, my son, which precludes my warning your backsides for today's foolishness. I hope your

Jaren will accept your apology." He turned back to Krogar. "Since my son made your acquaintance in a prison, am I hasty in presuming that you were there for some reason?"

Krogar smiled. "My Lord General, it was nothing—a small dispute over property."

"Somebody else's no doubt." The Lord General shrugged. "Still, I owe you for enabling my son to keep his word to his Jaren and to the army. Do you have something in mind for a reward?"

Krogar bowed. "I would not presume to instruct the Lord General in such a matter."

Dikahn nodded, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Tell me, Krogar; under what circumstances did you leave the army?"

The thief pursed his lips, then held out his hands. "It was nothing. A simple dispute over orders that resulted in a minor scuffle."

Dikahn nodded. "And who was the officer you struck?"

Krogar raised his eyebrows in a show of innocence, then he sighed. "A company officer named Vulner, Lord General. But," he added, "no one served the Shikazu better than I. I was dismissed against my will, and for an unjust reason."

Again, Dikahn nodded. "Krogar, faithful old soldier, I believe your treatment to have been harsh, and I would correct this injustice. Tomorrow you will join my son and his new friends here and report to the barracks in Meydal for army service."

"But, but, Lord General..."

Dikahn held up his hand. "No need to thank me, Krogar. This you have earned." The general turned toward Larenz. "You will bring special instructions from me to the station officer. It would not be wise to have you train on Tenuet. Therefore, you and your new comrades will be shipped to the Fourth Army and trained on Dashik. To put you any further away from Tenuet would require going outside the jurisdiction of the Shikazu."

Krogar held out his hands. "Lord General, it has been a long time since I saw service, and I am over forty now, and perhaps the decision to discharge me wasn't as unjust as I thought..."

Dikahn held up a hand. "None of this will stand before my orders, Krogar. Please, let me do this for you for what you did for my son."

Krogar stood straight and cocked his head. "If I don't?"

The Lord General leaned forward on his couch, his eyes deep and cold. "Consider the alternative, my purse-lifting friend."

Krogar studied the general for an instant, then bowed. "Of course, the Lord General's wishes will be observed."

"Of course." Dikahn nodded at Larenz. "Find a

servant and arrange quarters for your friends."

"Yes, father." Lorenz turned and the rest of us bowed, then turned to follow. Dikahn caught my eye as I was about to go through the door, then motioned for me to remain.

"Close the door."

I did so then walked back and stood before Dikahn's couch. "Yes, Lord General?"

Lorenz said that your village was far south?"

"Yes, Lord General. The Jaren of the Redbar hails from Ahrem."

The general nodded. "Then your fencing master would have been Ledor?"

"Why, yes. Do you know him?"

Dikahn nodded. "He has served with me. He and his Jaren officered a group under me during the last war. A Shikazu is Ledor." Dikahn rubbed his chin, then studied me. "You know that, after training, my son's Jaren will officer a company?"

"Yes. He told us."

Dikahn nodded. "Tell me—what is your name?"

"Eoola."

"Tell me, Eoola. Would the Redbar apply to serve in my son's company?"

"I cannot speak for the Jaren, Lord General, but for myself, I would serve with him." I saw no change on the old general's face, but I had the feeling that I had said just the right thing.

Dikahn waved his hand. "Go and join your mates, Eoola, and thank you."

"Thank you, Lord General." I bowed and left the room.

Dashik is the second planet in the Minuraam system, the Fourth Star of the Shikazu. There is a large Shikazu population on the planet dominating the Bergunz, the squat, powerful, fur-covered creatures that were the planet's original masters. Dashik is lonely, and very, very hot. After our month-long flight from Tenuet and our first look at our new station, and after absorbing the molten wrath of Aragdan, the training instructor assigned to us, we appreciated all the more Lord General Dikahn's peculiar sense of humor.

Training by a field unit is different from group training at a station, such as the centers on Tenuet. Perhaps the station cadres are further removed from the threat of invasion. In any event, the instructors in a field unit know that any moment their charges may be called upon to fight, and fight well. Aragdan, therefore, was a merciless master, and we would have been continually sweat soaked had not the air been so dry.

So much of it was so different from the jungle. Learning the jump racks was the first thing. The jump rack is designed to amplify body movements

both in strength and speed. Standing by itself, the machine looks like a skeleton without a head. One backs into it, stands on the foot plates, then beginning with the toe belts, the metal frame is strapped to the body, up the legs, waist, chest, shoulders, arms and wrists. The hands fit into three-fingered metal gloves. At first, our training group spent as much time ramming each other as we did drilling in the racks, but in time we learned the machines, making them parts of us. With them we could run great distances at high speeds carrying heavy weights, or jump to incredible heights, or down from such heights with the rack absorbing the shocks. When the backs of our machines were mounted with the heavy black cubes, we saw why the racks were necessary. To heft one of the cubes took two strong Shikazu, who would, nevertheless, be cursing, staggering, and straining every muscle before they had to put the cube down moments later. Each Shikazu had to carry one, for the cubes powered the wands and shields we carried.

The new wands were connected to the cube by a clear cable, and they could slice metal as a hot dagger slices cheese. The black cube supplied the power. The shields were not the heavy, black deflection squares we were used to, but instead were almost transparent nets, also connected to the power supply. The nets could absorb almost any kind of energy, including sunlight, and convert it in a flash to power that could be used by the wand. For the new weapons, we had to learn new tactics, which meant new drills. The drills seemed unending, but in time the Jaren of the Redbar functioned again as the parts of a well-designed machine. In addition, the Redbar could function in a like manner with any other Jaren in our training group, and the entire group together made a formidable force. Despite his cursing, ridicule and constant haranguing, as we reached the end of our training, we could see the pride—the Shikazu—burning in Aragdan's eyes.

Sprinkled among our hundred and fifty recruits were several who had sworn to the army before, such as Krogar. Most of them were the remaining members of their respective Jarens. They were a curious lot. Some were like Krogar—wanderers, thieves, drunkards—pulled back into the army from outside. Others were more recently divested of their Jarens by the humans during the battle for Basiphor, Dashik's sister planet. These were sullen soldiers indeed. Watching them drill with us, I could not but help think of my own feelings should my mates be lost in battle. When I tried to imagine it, I felt hot rage trying to hold together a life shredded by emptiness and vengeance.

We knew that the old soldiers, as we called them, would officer the groups that were formed from our training group. Five Jarens make up a section, and

five sections make up a company. The company is officered by another Jaren, and the odds and ends of old soldiers officered the sections. As was predicted, Larenz and his Jaren of the Red Claw excelled at everything, and a company was formed from our training group officered by the Red Claw. Krogar officered the section in which the Redbar found itself. Despite his light-fingered past, we had witnessed the old thief at dirfts, and were willing to serve him.

We knew from the first that we were being trained as part of the invasion force that would retake Baalphor. The human destruction of the Baalphor garrison, and the subsequent occupation of the planet by the humans, forged an aura of vengeance and somber purpose about those on Dashik who prepared to right the humiliation to the Shikazu. Army battle cruisers had blockaded the planet and had fought the human space forces to a standstill. The rest was up to us. We were entered into the Fourth Army roster as the Second Company, Fifth Assault Group, Fifth Battle Force, attached to the Baalphor Invasion Armada.

On an evening soon after, I was sent by Larenz to find Krogar and inform him of a meeting of company officers. The black of Dashik's night had almost swallowed the heat of the day, and cool breezes picked at my skin as the desert gave up its warmth. I found Krogar seated on a rock at the bottom of a draw cut into the desert floor by some long-dead stream. As I came up on him, my feet walked fine sand, and he did not hear me. Then, when I could view the direction the old thief faced, I saw them—four pale apparitions glowing with the Light's color. I gasped, and Krogar turned his head and faced me. "Eeola?"

"Yes." I could hardly hear my own voice.

Krogar held out his hand toward the patches of glowing blue. "Be not afraid, Eeola. Meet my mates of the Jaren of the Green Dragon: Pegda, Yos, Al-daan, and our *Ds*, Radier."

I watched the glows. They were unmoving, yet, they seemed to flow within themselves as something bearing life. I swallowed. "Krogar, are they . . . ghosts?"

The old soldier placed his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands, and rested his grizzled chin upon them as he studied the representations of his mates. "Ghosts. I wonder. The *Rhasaksh* tells us that our brothers stand with us in death as they did in life. Perhaps they are." Krogar remained silent for a long moment, then shook his head. "Perhaps they are nothing more than projections of my mind made visible by what little of the Light that remains in me. This is what some would have you believe."

"And you, Krogar; what do you believe?"

The old soldier shrugged. "I do not concern myself. They are here, and I accept them." He turned and faced me. "Why have you come for me?"

"Larenz . . . he has called a meeting of officers."

Krogar stood. "Then I should be off." He again faced the spots of light. "Be off, my brothers. I am not ready to join you yet. Perhaps soon." The lights rose from the desert floor, faded into the rock wall of the draw, then disappeared. I jumped as Krogar slapped me on the shoulder. "Let us be off."

Our weeks of training concluded, we packed into landing shuttles and were rooved to an army attack transport, where we were assigned a compartment. Our jump racks and weapons stood in the shuttles, a silent, motionless, mindless company awaiting only the direction of living bodies to wreak destruction upon the defenders of Baalphor. And how we longed—lusted—for that destruction. As we talked among ourselves during the days it took to reach our staging area around Baalphor, we would often speak of the great heroes that peopled the history of the Shikazu—epics all of us had long since memorized from childhood, but which never grew dull from the telling.

Larenz would bring Krogar with him and go from Jaren to Jaren in our section explaining such of the battle plan as applied to the company. If need be, any member of the company would be able to fill Larenz's place should he fall. Larenz would also recount his favorite Shikazu epics, and did so in a strong, clear voice that seemed louder than it was. Often he would leave the compartment and I would look around at my Jaren, my section, and all of those who made up my company. We were more than twenty-five separate Jarens with a common purpose. We were something of unity, a single structure of new metal—a Jaren with a hundred and twenty-five mates.

At the staging area, as we stood silently in the landing shuttle, strapped into our racks, I could see the battle blood pounding through my company and could feel it in my own veins. The shuttle lurched downward, gradually pulled forward as it applied power, and swung several times as it maneuvered to make formation with the ship's other shuttles. In the front of the compartment, Larenz listened to the steady chatter of the tactical information channel. We could all hear that the invasion was going according to plan, which meant that our role had not changed. As we came abreast of the human battle lines, the top of the shuttle would open and we would jump out of the compartment into the steaming jungle below. After the area had been cleared of humans, we would strike through the lines and secure

a rise in the jungle floor the humans had equipped and manned as a heavy weapons position.

Once we entered the atmosphere, we could feel the shuttle being rocked as the humans threw up their defensive screen of weapons. Inside me, I felt frustration at being unable to strike back during the landing. About us, landing shuttles were being blown from the sky, and perhaps chance would favor us, perhaps not. I looked at my mates and saw none of this in their eyes. In them I read what we had been taught. Some will get through, enough to do what must be done. We train that, if we should be chosen by chance to avenge the Shikazu, we will be ready. If chance chooses us to die, others will be spared by the same chance—others who will assume our burden of revenge.

Larenz held out his hands as the shuttle leveled in its fall. "Stand ready!" At that moment, the shuttle was slammed by a huge fist of energy. Since the racks compensated for the lurch, none of us were knocked down to the deck, but Larenz entered into a heated conversation with the pilot. He turned back to us. "We cannot steer, and we have missed our jump point. Also, the doors will not open. The pilot will attempt to circle around to make our jump point again. At my command, use your wands to cut through the walls of the shuttle. When you land, clear your area, then regroup on the Red Claw. Watch for where we land."

As the shuttle lurched and swallowed, all of us reached to the part of our racks behind our waists and energized our wands and shields. A hum that almost drowned out the pounding of the humans' weapons filled the compartment. Larenz turned to us. "We can't make it! We will be far behind enemy lines when we land. When you land, clear and regroup." He hefted his wand and aimed it at the bulkhead. "Shikazu!"

Those of us against the walls turned our wands against them, unmindful of the splatters of molten metal that clung to our legs. It was soon impossible to see in the spark- and smoke-filled compartment. Then, one plate fell away, then another. The plate I worked on tore away exposing blue skies crossed with red beams and black smoke trails. I jumped, followed by others behind me. The wind tumbled me as an angry swarm of red streaks cut the air around me. Using my arms and legs as counterweights, I gained control of my fall and began playing my wand on the jungle below. A red streak would emerge from the jungle, then I would sizzle that point, catching the return fire with my shield. Before I hit ground, my shield had overloaded and was deflecting, rather than absorbing, energy.

I crashed through the leaf cover and saw that I had landed in the center of a human heavy weapons

position. The weapons itself could not be used on me, but the crew quickly pulled hand weapons and fired them in my direction. As though they were stalks of gava cane, my wand swept the humans and cut them down. As I swiped fire with a pocket of the animals entrenched in a protected position, Gem joined me, and together we saw the last of them, then turned our wands upon the weapon to render it useless.

The jungle seemed strangely quiet as Gem, his face flushed with victory, turned toward me. "Ah, it is true! We are the Shikazu! We are unconquerable!"

"Gem, in which direction did the Red Claw land? I could not see." "That way." Gem pointed into the jungle, gained control of himself, breathed a few times, then nodded. "Yes, this way. The company is strung out all along the enemy line."

We ran from the position into the jungle and were soon joined by one of the members of a Jaren in our section. His gleaming eyes and bared teeth reflected our own. In a few moments we were joined by a few more Shikazu, among them, Krogar and Vastar. Krogar led us through the jungle, picking up more of the company as we went, until we walked into a wall of red light. The humans had brought up a unit to block our attempt to join up with the Red Claw. Entrenched in good defensive positions, their own kinds of weapons and shields deployed, this would be no area-clearing exercise. The main body of our small force, covered by our shields, played our wands over the human positions, while Krogar and the remainder of the force jumped to the right and out of sight. After a few moments, the screams from the human positions evidenced the success of Krogar's flanking maneuver. Krogar stuck his head out of the jungle and motioned us to follow. As I stepped through a row of brush, I saw a human staring at me, the wound in his shoulder and chest still smoking, leaving a sick, sweet smell of cooking flesh. He reached out his right hand toward one of their hand weapons, and without thought, my wand passed across the creature's throat, severing its head from its body. The grisly orb rolled across the jungle floor and came to rest against a tree, eyes still staring.

"Eeola!" I lifted my head and saw Krogar looking at me from beyond a low wall of brush. "Over here! We must move quickly!" He turned and disappeared into the jungle. I hesitated, thinking for some reason that there was something I should do for the remains of this fallen enemy. I could think of nothing. Hefting my wand and shield, I took a last look at those eyes, then followed Krogar's path.

Except for a straggling human or two, the rest

of our journey to join up with Larenz was without event. One of the scouts Krogar sent out reported back late in the day to inform him that contact with Larenz had been made. In an hour, we were again a company. Vastar, Gem and I searched the others, and when we found Dob and Tim, we hugged, slapped backs, joked, and roughed around until we were ordered to silence. Other Jarens celebrated as they found their lost mates, but others wept. A third of the company had been lost; either killed or still wandering the jungle.

Larenz conferred with the section officers, then Krogar came back to our section. He gathered us around, then began in a low voice. "The officers have decided to try for our original objective." He pulled a map from his note and spread it on the jungle floor. He pointed one of his armored fingers at a spot on the map. "We are here. It is a half day's walk to the hill," he stabbed another part of the map. "We will be coming up behind the enemy lines, which could be good or bad. If they do not expect us, we shall surprise them. If they expect us," Krogar looked up at the circle of faces, "if they expect us, there will be that many more of them with which to fertilize the soil." Folding the map, Krogar stood. "Follow me."

Long after the horizon swallowed the sun, we crept through the brush, stopping only to either check or clear the trail ahead. In the night, the humans took to holes, using only remote equipment against us. We easily infiltrated their positions, slid into their holes and blessed them with eternal sleep. The jungle was our home.

In time, a halt was ordered, pickets put out, and orders for rest given. I unstrapped myself from my rack and slid to the ground and was asleep in an instant.

My dreams, if dreams they were, showed Ahrm at the harvest season; the one dusty street piled with jeba cane, gahn roots, and the bright yellow peppers that seared the tongue with a delicious fire. The large blue bein melons stacked in a pyramid, dusty tiki-ruch creeping in and out of the stands and people, then running into the jungle with their art-acquired fruit. The Redbar with its booty of melons, bursting them against the trees and devouring the ice-green flesh amidst gay laughter and fine belches...

"Up." Vastar tapped my shoulder. I shook the sleep from my eyes and sprang to my feet to begin strapping myself into my jump rack. The sky was yet red as the shadows gave back the sun, and the broad leafed trees and overhead vines stood out black against the sky. My stomach grumbled to remind me that the company had not eaten since landing. Had we put down as planned, we would be in contact with our forces, and food brought up. Never mind.

There would be food once we drove the humans from the hill.

The sky yellowed, and soon those of us at the edge of the clearing that opened before us could see the hill. It was nothing—little more than a bump in the carpet of the jungle. The top, however, bristled with heavy weapons, and on the lower slopes, freshly blasted human defensive positions could be seen. Perhaps, because we had not taken our objective as planned, it remained as a human strongpoint, probably holding up the advance of the Shikazu. In every mind watching that hill ran the same thought: It is our error; therefore, it is ours to correct.

From where I stood, I could see Larenz nod toward his widely dispersed section leaders, then move out, his mates of the Red Claw close at his back. We halted at the edge of the clearing at the base of the hill, then, upon Larenz's signal, we jumped our racks toward the hill, slashing our wands toward anything that moved or might move. The humans' return fire was delayed only a few seconds, but in that time we were across the clearing and at their throats. The first line fell before us almost without loss, but as we worked our way uphill, the second line of human defenders was reinforced. In addition, several of the heavy weapons on the crest of the hill were turned in our direction. I saw others fall as red beams eluded shields, burning great pulpy holes in Shikazu chests, but I paid them no heed, for the blood was upon me. My wand could not find enough of the humans as it slashed and butchered all those it could find, my shield sucking up their beams to return them through my stick of death.

Still, battle blood or no, we slowed in front of the wall of force placed before us. The defenders—all well-armed—numbered almost a thousand, and as my arm, then my leg, caught human fire, even I cooled in my tracks. Then we saw it: a crossfire of countless red beams swept over Larenz. He fell, his pieces rolling in different directions down the slope.

Time stood still as a primeval roar erupted from the Shikazu. We moved forward as shields of blinding white fury made us gods of wrath, impervious to the feeble weapons of the humans. Our grief shot through our wands and scourged the hill, and the humans melted before us, for they were mere mortals.

Night fell upon the hill, and I thought with amusement of the pockets of humans we had slaughtered—the outraged looks on their faces as we cut them down, their hands stretched over their heads, one or two waving little white flags. The human, says Vastar, has a strange concept of war. The human thinks it to be a game, and when one side beats the other, the losers may throw up their hands, smile

and retire to the sidelines to await the next round. The Shikazu expects no quarter, and gives none. If there were such a thing as a human worthy of being spared, what possible reason would the creature have for being on Baalhor?

Hungry as we were, we only picked at our ration blocks. The wine that had been brought up, however, saw more enthusiastic custom. We knew Larenz such a short time, and would that there had been more time, that our grief could have been that much deeper. The top of the hill was almost bare of trees—not by nature's choice, but by ours—and as we sat crosslegged on the ground, downing great draughts of wine and picking at our rations, the stars spread out over our heads. We had no fires, and we did not recognize the stranger as he walked into our midst. "Is this the Second Company of the Fifth Assault?" The voice sounded hollow, but familiar.

I struggled to my feet. "Lord General Dikahn?"

The figure nodded. "Yes."

"It is Ecola . . . of the Redbar—"

The figure nodded again. "Yes, one of my son's companions from the prison." A chuckle worked its way through the old general's grief. Hearing his words, others stood and faced the general. He held up his hands, palms outward. "Please, resume your rest. No one has earned it more." We remained standing until the general nodded and lowered himself to the ground. The remains of Larenz's company in our area gathered around him and sat down. The general looked around at us. "Are you being fed well?"

Several voices muttered an affirmative. We watched as Dikahn bowed his head for a moment, then lifted it. "Who commands this company now?"

Vastar spoke. "The Red Claw still commands this company, Lord General, and will until either it or the company no longer remains."

Dikahn reached out a hand and clamped it on Vastar's shoulder. "Well said, soldier. Well said." He removed his hand, let it fall into his lap, then faced us. "I have no military purpose here, my soldiers, and should be off. There is much for me to do." Dikahn started up, but Tim stood over him.

"Would the Lord General care to hear the song I have made in honor of his son?" Tim held out his pipes.

Dikahn rubbed his eyes and nodded. "I would hear your song, soldier. Play."

Tim began, the haunting strains of the tiny pipes marking well the grief of the company, and, as well, the grief of a Lord General. The simple tune washed over the listeners—sad, yet supported by a will of metal, until all the company had gathered to hear. As Tim ended the first refrain, and began the sec-

ond, Kroger talked the song of death:

*Hear me universe,
This was one of us,
Our comrade Larenz.
His fellows wish him well,
On his journey of endless night,
Wishing only to be at his side,
Slain in battle
As Shikazu.
Give us this, Oh Universe,
That we may be
As our comrade Larenz;
Shikazu*

The notes of the pipes died, and the shadowed scene before my eyes could have been carved from black and dark grey stone. Lord General Dikahn then stood, turned and was swallowed by the night. One by one we drifted back to our wine and ration blocks.

The next morning, the humans counterattacked with a fury we hardly expected. Those that lived were sent back down the hill, licking their wounds. Afterwards, the Jaren of the Redbar laid Timbenevva to rest. It is hard to explain the feeling of losing a Jaren mate. As an individual, you still live, but losing an arm or leg would cause less grief. No human can understand the desolation, the endless pain of a lost mate. In time, a scab of sorts forms, you go on, but it is missing—that fierce joy that filled us when we whipped Ledor on the drill ground. The feeling of superiority when we defeated the Jaren of the Golden Dart for the rights to the swimming hole. The Shikazu feeling when we took the hill from the humans. Victory still sat well, but it was something less than it was, despite his Light still being with us.

To fill out our military unit, we accepted Zeth, the sole remaining member of the Green Waters Jaren of the village of Kurinam. He was a jungle brother, but aloof—apart from us. His only two goals left little room for conversation between us: He would kill humans, and he would join his mates of the Green Waters in their endless night. Who could argue with him? He, and his mates, were Shikazu.

But the Redbar was not a unit. When the Company was pulled off the hill, there was still that battle blood—that kill-the-humans feeling—that fired our actions of old. I look back at it now and it seems that, of all things, we wanted victory. Next, we still wanted to live. We had not yet achieved Zeth's single-minded desire to die, and in the process, to take a host of humans with us. It was enough for us to send the humans on the trip.

Our racks were equipped with extra packs, and we carried our rations and shelters with us. Our

company was assigned a place in the spearhead that would split the human forces of the Baalpherian Main Continent. In reality, the planet Baalpher has but one continent worthy of the name, but the original inhabitants and subsequent convention had designated several of the larger islands as continents. Neither the humans nor ourselves considered the fight for Baalpher to hinge on anything other than control of the Main. As with all modern armies, the human forces were mobile and widely scattered; however, there were several reinforced positions that commanded wide areas of surrounding ground. Between their defensive screens and well entrenched fortifications, it was left to our infantry forces to destroy these positions. The most formidable of these positions, and the land headquarters of the human forces, was the Citadel: a batholith thrust from the jungle floor with sides so sheer that not even jungle vines or air-borne seeds had found a niche. A single fissure in the west wall allowed access to the top—for those who controlled the heights above and along the fissure. The top of the fortress was generally flat, with only trees and other jungle growth to soften its stark appearance. As night defeated day, the pale yellow glows of permanent defensive screens could be seen covering the top, while random bursts of fire cascaded down the fissure. To attack such a thing was madness; to let it remain unharmed, keeping an iron hand on our movement across the surrounding bush, was madness of another kind. We would attack.

Where the shields over the human positions overlapped, neutral slits existed. The nature of these fields was such that beams and high-speed projectiles could not penetrate with effect. Slower-moving landing shuttles, however, might make it through. The strongest evidence supporting this was the deployment of the human forces beneath the screens. Diagrams prepared by orbital survey showed the areas surrounding each of the slits to be heavily defended. There was no trick plan. We would assault at the places and in the manner expected by the humans. We would cast the spirit of the Shikazu against that of the humans. Two waves of shuttles, a total of forty-six, would make the attack. The first wave was to fight through the initial defense ring and secure a position for the second wave. While the first wave held the position, the second would fight through the lines and knock out the screens. As soon as they accomplished their task, the might of the Fourth Army would fall on the position in a massive airborne assault, bringing the Citadel to its knees. Our company was assigned to the second wave.

As we prepared to move into the shuttles, the Jaren of the Redbar pledged the blood of its brother Timbenevva on the heads of the human defenders of the

Citadel. Zeth, his mind wrapped in his own thoughts, stood apart from us. I could see that Vastar was bothered by this. A Jaren must work as the fingers of a hand, and clearly, Zeth was not one of us. The racks had already been moved inside our company's shuttle, and while we awaited the command to mount, we squatted outside in the narrow strip of shade cast by the landing craft. As did the others of the company, we discussed the coming battle. After the traditional round of boasts, brags and declarations of bloodletting, our group quieted as each of us played pictures in our minds of skilled wands and screaming Shikazu decimating the humans. My imaginings were interrupted by a strange quality in Vastar's voice. "Zeth?"

Our new member came back from his own mental wanderings and looked at our *Di*. "Yes, Vastar?"

Vastar studied each of us in turn, then turned back to Zeth. "The Redbar has pledged the blood of its fallen mate on the heads of the enemy."

Zeth nodded, his eyes studying the ground in front of him. "I was listening."

Vastar nodded. "If you would join us, Zeth, in our pledge, we would join you in pledging the blood of your brothers of the Green Waters."

Zeth brought up his head sharply, his eyes examining Vastar's. His eyes grew bright as he slowly nodded, reached out both hands, clamped one on my shoulder and the other on Dob's. "Their names . . . Perra, our *Di*. Then Vane, Dommis, and Arapen. Your brother's name?"

"Our brother's name is Timbenevva." We each extended our hands and clasped them in the center of our circle. Vastar's eyes studied us as he spoke. "Then, let the Light of our fallen brothers—Timbenevva, Perra, Vane, Dommis, and Arapen—go with the Jaren of the Redbar and Green Waters into battle. Let their strength fill us and their wands join us as the Jaren of the Redbar and Green Waters goes forth to avenge the deaths of its brothers."

We all stood, then hugged and slapped Zeth as we welcomed him to the Jaren, and he welcomed us. We would, again, work as the fingers of a hand; we were a Jaren.

*J*esahr of the Red Claw, Larenz's Jaren mate, stood in the front of the shuttle's compartment observing the tactical information as we fell toward the Citadel. We knew Jesahr to be an excellent leader, and had resworn to him. The shuttle lurched as unseen forces slapped against its hull. Jesahr turned to us. "The shuttles going through the slit—those that made it that far—are being burned out of the sky before they can discharge their companies. Only parts of three companies in the first wave have made it to the ground. Our orders have

changed. We will turn and go out over the center field of one of the screens and discharge above it. Those of us that make it to the ground should be close to the screen's projector battery. Questions?" There were none. Jeeahr nodded at the pilot, and a moment later the shuttle banked and swung to the left. A moment later, and the overhead of the craft was open. Screaming "Shikazu!" we leaped out over the Citadel.

The familiar wind-blast struck my face as I emerged, then controlled my fall. Below me appeared to be nothing but the jungle-covered Citadel, but in a moment I felt myself slowed as the feeling of a thousand insects crawling on my body began. The landscape below grew wavy and distorted, and all sound ceased. My rack lost all power, freezing me into a spread-legged position, my wand dead and helpless in my hand.

I had little time to think of these things as blinding pains shot through my head, chest, and muscles. Then they were gone and I was falling. As the ground rushed up at me, I braced myself for the impact that would see my end, but power slowly came back to my jump rack and wand. Numerous streaks of red cracked and sizzled the air around us, but the source for most of these was a slight rise in the terrain almost directly below me. I directed my wand below my feet and roared the site I had picked for landing. Most of the human fire was directed toward the slot where the main body of the second wave was attempting entrance, but I could see from the fire we were drawing that many of us would die. From the stiff, tumbling falls some were taking, I realized that not everyone's racks had gotten back power after falling through the shield.

Even with my rack absorbing most of the shock, striking the ground stunned me and I rolled down-hill, coming to rest against a tree. The slashes of my wand had downed several of the humans, but many more remained, and only my unexpected roll saved me. The humans unleashed a red crossfire at my tumbling form, causing themselves much damage as the fire from one side fell into the other's ground. I came up beneath my shield, pulsing my wand at all movements. The red fire slackened as the humans still on their feet sought the safety of trees, rocks, and holes. Soon my shield could absorb no more energy and the red fire splashed off it as I worked my way up the hill. Further to my right, I caught sight of Krogar littering the ground with humans. Beyond him, there were others—all moving up the hill toward the projector. Still more humans broke from above and were cut down by our wands. I would have felt pity for the foolish creatures that stood before us, had not my mind been blinded to all but one thing: destroy the projector.







There was no organized assault, no cover fire and flank. We reached the top of the hill and faced trenches manned by humans determined to make a stand. Behind them stood a tracked vehicle mounted with a dull green dome—the projector. Our wands roasted the trenches while our shields swatted away the enemy fire. Some dropped, but still we moved forward until we stood in the trenches and swept them of human life. The projector crew fell clutching at ripped chests and severed limbs before they could surrender. There was no need to destroy the projector. Krogar climbed the stairs into a side hatch, executed an operator who huddled on the deck whimpering, then reached out a hand and turned off all the controls. I turned from the door and watched as the sky filled with Fourth Army shuttles discharging their companies. The Citadel had been broken.

A quick headcount showed Vastar, Geen, and Zeth to be among the dead; however, Doh and I could spare them little thought. With the fall of the Citadel, the human lines were rolling up. The revenge for the Baalpher garrison was at hand, and the battle forces of the Baalpher Armada took only a deep breath before locking with the remains of the human forces. A shuttle moved the remains of our company from the Citadel to the jungle below, where we joined other units of the Fifth Assault Group.

A few human units attempted surrender, but their faces removed this course from the list of human options. The battle blood was running hot, and it would not cease until we ran out of humans to kill.

We saw only our small part of the advance, but we heard the news from other units. Across the entire Main Continent, the humans were folding and striking north. The Second and Fifth Battle Forces deployed across the human's lines of retreat, and the rest was a matter of time and blood. Afterwards, Basiphor rocked with our cries: "Shikazu! Shikazu! Shikazu!"

Krogar joined me as I laid my last Jaren mate, Dob, to rest. The pain of losing my mates mixed with the elation of victory confused me. Krogar had brought extra rations of wine, but that only confused me further. As the distance in time from our victory increased, the elation diminished and the pain grew.

Krogar drank deeply from his bottle, lowered it, then studied me for a long time. "At this moment, Eola, you wonder how you will last out the pain. Perhaps, you wonder, as I once did, if it is worth lasting out the pain." He shrugged. "I can't answer that for you. For myself, something inside of me snapped—you saw me on the trail. It was a death of sorts, living from moment to moment, thinking of nothing, of no one. But this," he lifted his free hand, "this has made me whole again. Our victory reminds us that we are Shikazu. I forgot that once, but never will again. You are Shikazu, Eola."

I nodded, took a deep breath, and felt a great weight lift from my heart. There would still be pain, but being Shikazu was my shield. In a manner of speaking, all Shikazu belonged to a single great Jaren—a band sworn to our brothers and traditions, founded upon our one truth: the Shikazu cannot be conquered.

As I drank from my flask, Krogar stood and walked into the night. The air was warm, and as the wine relaxed my muscles, I leaned back against a tree and let my mind wander back to Ahrm, where my mates and I planted our hair. Only I had not returned to the village, but I swore to. At the end of my service I would once again walk that dusty path and smell the tarswood and jungle orchids. Perhaps, even Carrine of the Golden Dart—if she lived. I would settle into the routine of an elder, wed my woman and raise a hut full of screaming brats, that I would see join Jarens and travel the road to adulthood. Perhaps, when Lodar feels his years, I will become the new fencing master, I thought. As these thoughts wandered through my mind, I noticed that on the other side of my skull, there was a difference in the night.

I put down my flask and stood, holding my breath to listen. The tension in the air was wrapped around my heart as though it were some powerful snake. I heard murmurs, a wail, saw the discharge of an en-

ergy wand. A weeping figure staggered toward me from beyond the near trees. I could not recognize him. "You!" I shouted. As though the figure had no volition, it stopped and faced me. "What is it? Do you know?" The figure nodded, then hung its head. "What?"

"Tenuet—the Light—has been destroyed!"

Eola hung his head, then raised it and looked at me. "Now, human, perhaps you can understand." He held out his hands toward the four shimmering lights. "That Light which remains in us—in our Jaren—waits for me." He dropped one hand to his lap, but pointed the other in my direction. "But understand, we are not conquered. Since the war, no Jarens have been formed, no marriages have been made, and no babies conceived. In a few years there will be none of us left. As it came to our brothers and sisters, the endless sleep shall come to us. Is this how a conquered race behaves? The Mithond grows its young to serve you, but the Shikazu will not add to your subjects. Now, we are as the kazu wandering lost in the jungle—awaiting the victory of time.

*We can be killed,
but we can never
be conquered.*

We are Shikazu."

The old Shikki stood, wandered off into the jungle, and was followed by the blue lights. I never saw him again. I looked at that landmark and realized that it was the Citadel. There, and in the jungle surrounding the feature, Eola of the Redbar Jaren had lost his mates, then the Light that sustained his race.

Was it the old fellow's story that touched me, or was it because of the few school mates of my own that lost their lives on Basiphor during the war of the four stars? I don't know. I never signed the agreement with Wiggins—at least, not for that particular piece of property. Basiphor is a big planet, and I don't worry about Wiggins.

Instead, I go to that rocky outcropping every now and then, and watch. It doesn't happen often, but every now and then you can see the lights gathering to welcome one of their own to the endless sleep.

...the Traveller in Black
by John Brunner



had many names, but only one nature...
—illustrated by George Barr

The Things That Are Gods



*Lo how smoth and curuit be these rockes that
in the creacion were joggit, for that they haſt ben
straikit by myriades of thickheidit folk hither yomen
men in peregrinage, beggarlie criand after Miracula.
And I say one at the leste wiſ granted 'em. Was'nt that
a marvell and a wonder, passand credence, that they
helden dull ston for more puissant than your quicke
man, the whiche wrought brethe and dreme and ſoffre
and fede wormes?*

—A Lytel Boke Againte Folie

I

Tipping back the hood of his black cloak, leaning on his staff of curdled light, the traveller contemplated the land where he had incarcerated the elemental called Litorgos. That being hated both salt and silt; accordingly, here had been a most appropriate choice.

Half a day's walk from the edge of the sea the land reared up to form a monstrous irregular battlemented cliff twenty times the height of a tall man, notched where a river cascaded over the rim of the plateau above. Thence it spilled across a wedge-shaped plain of its own making and developed into a narrow delta, following sometimes this and sometimes that main channel. In principle such land should have been fertile. Opposite the river's multiple mouths, however, a dragon-backed island created a swinge, such that at spring tide ocean-water flooded ankle-deep over the soil, permeating it with salt. Therefore only hardy and resistant crops could be grown here, and in a bad year might be overtaken by the salty inundation before they were ready to barvest.

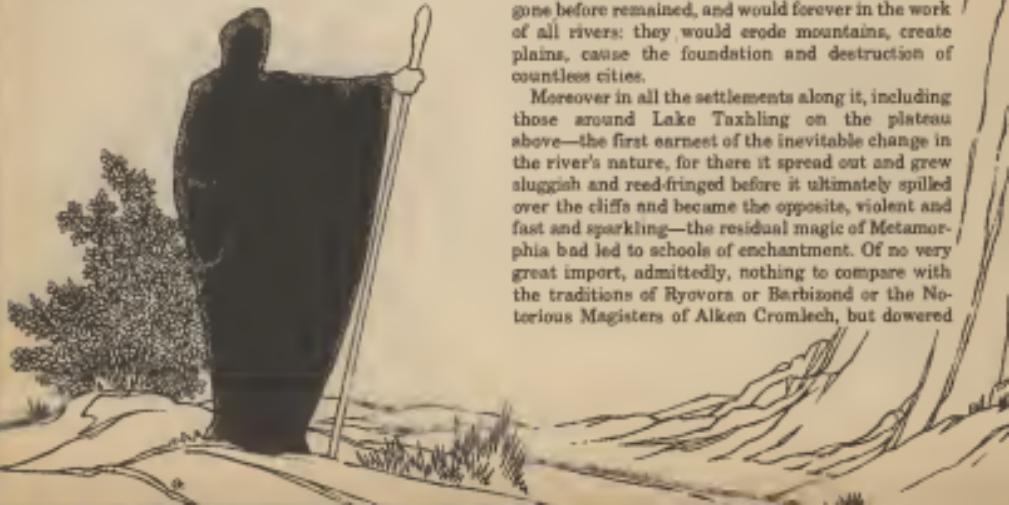
This had not prevented the establishment of cities. One had been founded close to the waterfall, and flourished a while on trade with the plateau above.

A crude staircase had been carved out of the living rock, up which slaves daily toiled bearing salt, dried fish, and baskets of edible seaweed, to return with grain and fruit and sunflower-oil. Then the elemental slumbering below stretched to test the firmness of his intangible bonds; they held him, but the staircase crumbled and the city disappeared.

More recently a port had been built on wooden piles at the mouth of the main channel; the island opposite was thickly forested. With the clearance of the woodland, marble was discovered. Cutting and polishing it, exporting it on rafts poled along the coastal shallows, the inhabitants grew rich enough to deck their own homes with marble and with colourful tiles in patterns each of which constituted a charm against ill fortune. But now the marble was exhausted, and so was most of the timber; and the city Stanguray, which had once been famous, was reduced to a village. Its present occupants lived in the attics and lofts of the old town, and as they lay down to sleep could listen to the chuckle of water rippling within the lower part of their homes. To get from one surviving building to another even toddlers deftly walked along slimy rope bridges, while the needs of the elderly and better-off—for there were still rich and poor in Stanguray—were met by bearers of reed-mat palankeens, adept at striding down the waterways and across the mudflats on stilts taller than themselves. This mode of transport had no counterpart elsewhere.

And it was entirely fitting, the traveller reflected, that this should be so. For once the river which here met the ocean had run under the ramparts of Acromel, and was known as Metamorphis. No longer did it instantly change whatever fell or swam in its waters, it having been decreed that after a certain span of altering the nature of other things, it must amend its own. Yet and still a trace of what had gone before remained, and would forever in the work of all rivers: they would erode mountains, create plains, cause the foundation and destruction of countless cities.

Moreover in all the settlements along it, including those around Lake Taxhling on the plateau above—the first earnest of the inevitable change in the river's nature, for there it spread out and grew sluggish and reed-fringed before it ultimately spilled over the cliffs and became the opposite, violent and fast and sparkling—the residual magic of Metamorphis had led to schools of enchantment. Of no very great import, admittedly, nothing to compare with the traditions of Ryovora or Barbizon or the Notorious Magisters of Alken Cromlech, but dowered



nonetheless with a certain potency.

Such matters being of the keenest interest to him, the traveller set forth along riverside paths towards this paradoxical village of marble columns and tiled pilasters. It was dawn; the clouds in the east were flushing scarlet and rose and vermillion, and fisher-folk were chanting melodiously as they carried their night's catch ashore in reed baskets and spilled them into marble troughs, once destined for the watering of noblemen's horses, where women and children busily gutted them. The smell of blood carried on the wind. It was acute in the traveller's nostrils when he was still a quarter-hour's walk distant.

And then it occurred to him that in fact there was only a slight breeze, and that it was at his back: blowing off the land, towards the sea.

Moreover he perceived of a sudden that it was not just the light of dawn which was tinting pink the water in the channels either side of the crude cause-way he was following.

There must have been an astonishing slaughter.

The traveller sighed. Last time he had seen a river literally running red in this manner, it had been because of a battle: one of dozens, all indecisive, in the constant war between Kanishmen and Kulyamen. But that matter was regulated pretty well to his satisfaction, and in any case this was not human blood.

If it were a precedented event, the inhabitants of Stanguray would presumably be able to inform him concerning this tainting of their river. The ground being impregnate with salt, one could not sink a sweet-water well; rainfall, moreover, was exiguous and seasonal herabouts. Consequently folk were much dependent on the river's cleanliness.

More disturbed by the situation than seemed reasonable, the traveller lengthened his strides.

W

hen the fish-guts had been thrown to the gulls the people of Stanguray went their various ways: the poorest to the beach, where they made fires of twigs and scorched a few of the smaller fish, sardines and pilchards, and gobbled them down with a crust of bread left over from yesterday's baking; the most prosperous, including naturally all those who owned an entire fishing-smack with a reliable charm on it, to their homes where breakfast awaited them; and the middling sort to the town's only cookshop, where they handed over a coin or a portion of their catch against the privilege of having their repast grilled on the public fire. Fuel was very short in Stanguray.

The said cookshop was the upper part of what had formerly been a temple, extended under the sky by a platform of creaky scantlings, water-worn and boreworm-pierced, salvaged from a wreck or a building long submerged.

Here a thin-faced, sharp-nosed, sharp-tongued young woman in a russet gown and a long apron supervised a fire on a block of slate whose visible sides were engraved with curlicues and runes. It would have been the altar when the temple's cult still thrived. Presiding over it like any priestess, she deigned to dispense hunks of griddle-cake and to char or stew vegetables brought by those lucky enough to own a farmable patch of ground, as well as cooking fish, while a hunchbacked boy who never moved fast enough to please her meted out rations of pickled onions, vinegar, and verjuice to add a quicker relish to the oily food.

A public fire, plainly, was a profitable operation, for everything about the shop was better appointed than one might have predicted. Though the external platform was fragile, though the variety of food was wholly dependent on who brought what, nonetheless



the woman's gown was of excellent quality, and the walls were unadorned with numerous precious reliques such as one would rather have expected to find in the homes of wealthy fishing-boat owners. Also, at least for those who paid in money, not only beer but even wine was to be had. The hunchback, lashed on by the woman's shouted order, rushed them by the mugful to the customers.

It was clear that at least one more waiter was not only affordable, but urgently needed.

However, that—to the traveller's way of thinking—was not the most curious aspect of this cookshop.

Having sated their bellies, the homeless poor plodded up from the beach carrying clay jars which they had filled at the point where the estuary water turned from brackish to drinkable... or should have done. Not long after, a string of children bearing by ones and twos full leathern buckets they could scarcely stand under the weight of also assembled.

The woman in charge seemed not to notice them for a long while. The delay grated on the patience of one girl, some twelve or thirteen years old, and finally she called out.

"Crancina, don't you know it's a foul-water day?"

"What of it?" the woman retorted, rescuing a roasted turnip from the flames, not quite in time.

"We had salt eels this morning, and we're clemmed!"

"Tell your mother to learn better," was the brusque reply, and Crancina went on serving her other customers.

Finally, several minutes later, she stood back from the fire and dusted her hands. Instantly the people waiting rushed towards her. The poorer got there first, being adult and desperate; nonetheless they contrived to offer at least a copper coin, which she took, hit, and dropped in the pocket of her apron, while pronouncing a cantrip over their water-jugs. Forced to the rear by those larger and stronger, the children from wealthier homes had no lack of cash, but they cautiously tasted the water after the spell had been spoken, as though fearing that much repetition might weaken it. All satisfied, they wended homeward.

"Are you curious concerning what you see, sir?" a thin voice said at the traveller's elbow. He had taken pains, as ever, not to be conspicuous; but it was time now to make more direct inquiries.

Turning, he found the hunchbacked boy perched on a table, for all the world like a giant frog about to take a leap. His sly dark eyes peered from under a fringe of black hair.

"I own that I'm intrigued," the traveller said.

"I thought you would be, seeing as I don't recall noticing you before. A pilgrim, are you? Cast ashore by some rascally sea-captain because contrary winds

made it too expensive to carry you all the way to the shrine you booked your passage for?" The boy grimmed hugely, making his face as wail as his body resemble a frog's.

"Do you meet many castaway pilgrims here, then?"

A crooked shrug. "Never! But even that would vary the monotony of my existence. Every day is more or less the same for all of us. Why otherwise would this enchanting of water be so remarkable?"

"Ah: then magic is at work."

"What else? Crancina has a sweet-water spell from granny, all she left when she died; and so whenever the water pinkens they all come here. It's making a nice little pile for her, naturally."

"She charges everybody?"

"Indeed, yes! She claims that performing the rite tires her out, so she must be compensated."

"What of those—for there must be some such—who have no money to pay for her services?"

"Why, she says they may wait for rain!" The boy essayed a laugh, which became more of a croak immediately.

"I deduce you are Crancina's brother," the traveller said after a pause.

"How so?" The boy blinked.

"You spoke of 'granny', as though you shared her." A grimace. "Well, half-brother. I often wonder whether it was granny's curse that twisted me, for I know she disapproved of our mother's second marriage.... However that may be!" His tone took on sudden urgency. "Will not you instruct me to bring you something, if only a hunk of bread? For I should by now have cooked and brought her the choicest of last night's catch, rich with oil and fragrant with herbs, and grilled to perfection on the best of our scant supply of logs. Any moment now she will tongue-lash me until it stings like a physical castration—at which, I may say, she is even more adept! Would you inspect my hruises?"

"There seems to be little love lost between you," the traveller observed.

"Love?" The hunchback cackled. "She wouldn't know the meaning of the word! So long as my father survived, and before our mother became bedridden, I made the most of life despite my deformity. Now she's my sole commander, mine's a weary lot! I wish with all my heart that some day I may find means to break free of her tyranny and make my own way in the world, against all odds!"

Prompt to his prediction Crancina shouted, "Josipil, why have you not set my breakfast on the embers? There's costly wood going up in smoke, and all the customers are served!"

Her shrill reprimand quite drowned out the traveller's reflexive murmur: "As you wish, so be it."

Cringing, the boy regaled the floor and scurried towards her. "Not so, sister!" he pleaded. "One re-

mains unfed, and I did but inquire what he would order."

Abruptly noticing the traveller, Crancina changed her tone to one of wheedling deference. "Sir, what's your pleasure? Boy, make him room and bring clean dishes and a mug at once!"

"Oh, I'll not trouble you to cook for me," the traveller answered, "seeing as how your brother explained your spell leaves you fatigued, and you must need sustenance yourself. I'll take a bit of fish from pickle, bread, and beer."

"You're courteous, sir," Crancina sighed, dropping on a nearby bench. "Yes, in truth these foul-water days are an accursed nuisance. Over and over I've proposed that a band of well-armed men be sent out, to trace the trouble to its source; but it's on the high plateau, seemingly; and these fainthearts hold that to be a place of sorcerers none can oppose. Monsters, too, if you believe them."

"Maybe it's the one slaughtering the other," Josip offered as he set mug and platter before the traveller. "There must come an end of that, when all expire!"

"It's not a joking matter!" snapped Crancina, raising her fist—and then reluctantly unballing it, as though belatedly aware she was being watched by a stranger. But she continued, "By all the powers, I wish I knew what use there is in spilling so much blood! Maybe then I could turn it to my own account for a change, instead of having to pander to the wants of these cajoling idiots, fool enough—you heard the girl, sir, I'll warrant!—fool enough to eat salt eels for breakfast when their noses must advise 'em there'll be nothing sweet to quench their thirst. Would you not imagine they could keep a day or two's supply that's fit to drink? If they can't afford a coopered barrel, surely there are enough old marble urns to be had for the trouble of dragging them to the surface. But they can't or won't be bothered. They're so accustomed to leaning out the window and dipping in the stream—and sending their ordures the same way, to the discomfort of us who live closer to the sea—they regard it as a change in the proper order of the world, never to be resisted, which will come right of itself."

"They pay you for performing your spell," the traveller said, munching a mouthful of the pickled fish Josip had brought and finding it savoury. "There's a compensation."

"I admit it," said Crancina. "In time I may grow rich, as wealth is counted in this miserable place. Already two widowers and two middle-aged bachelors are suing for my hand, and half a share in this cookshop, of course... But that is not what I want!"—with sudden fierceness. "I've told you what I want! I'm accustomed to being in charge, and I want that with all my heart and soul, and I'm seek-

ing a way of securing my fate while this dismal half-ruined town crumbles about me!"

So long ago there was not means to measure it, the traveller had accepted conditions pertaining to his sundry and various journeys through the land, imposed on him when a quartet of crucial planets cycled to a particular configuration in the sky.

The granting of certain wishes formed an essential element in the conditions circumscribing him... though it was true that the consequences of former wishes were gradually limiting the previous totality of possibilities. Some now were categorically unimplementable.

But even as he muttered formal confirmation—"As you wish, so be it!"—he knew one thing beyond a peradventure.

This was not one of those

III

Once it had been permitted him to hasten the seasons of the year and even alter their sequence. But that power belonged to the ages when the elementals still roved abroad, their random frenzy entraining far worse divagations of the course of nature. Tamed and pent—like Litorgos under the delta of the river which no longer merited the name of Metamorphis—they were little able to affect the world. Events were tending, in the prescribed manner, towards that end which Manus the enchanter had once defined as "desirable, perhaps, but appallingly dull." The day would break when all things would have but one nature, and time would have a stop, for the last randomness of the chaos existing in Eternity would have been eliminated.

To make way for a new beginning? Possibly. If not, then—in the very strictest sense—no matter, never mind... .

Until then, however, the elementals did still exist and fretted away with their enfeebled force, like Fegrism beating at the cap of cold lava which closed the crater of the volcano wherein perchance he now dwelt. Not a few had discovered that human practitioners of magic were, without having chosen to be, their allies. But there was a penalty attached to such collaboration, and the most minor of them had paid it long ago; they were reduced to activating hearth-charms. No doubt this was the fate which had overtaken Litorgos—no doubt it was he who drew the blood from the foal water, though he was in no position to benefit thereby. Blood had its place in magic, but it could never free an elemental.

But the traveller did not want so much as to think about Litorgos, or Stangurny, until the remainder of his business was completed. Nonetheless he did wish—and withal wished he could grant himself that

wish, as he must grant those of others—that he could whirl the planets around to the conformation which would mark the conclusion of his journey, and thereby enable a return to that place which, with every pace he took, seemed more and more likely to become the focus of terrible and inexplicable events.

Making haste was pointless. The orderly succession of time which he himself had been responsible for, as river-silt had created land at Stanguray, now held him tight in its grip. Some relief from his apprehension might be obtained, however, by over-occupying himself. Accordingly, on this journey he made a point of visiting not only those places familiar to him from aforetime—and sometimes from before time—but also newer locations.

One such was known by the name of Clurm. Here in the shadow of great oaks a lordling who held his birthright to have been usurped planned with a group of fanatical followers to create such a city as would lure anyone to remove thither on hearing news of it. Now they shivered in tents and ate half-raw game and wild mushrooms; but this new city was to have towers that touched the clouds, and streets wide enough for a hundred to march abreast, and brothels with the fairest of women to attract spirited youths, and a treasury overflowing with gold and gems to pay their fee; and an army would be forged from them to overthrow the usurper; and magicians would be hired to make them unquestioningly loyal; and all in the upshot would be as this wild dreamer pictured it.

Except that after a year of exile his little band had not erected so much as a log-cabin, deeming manual labour beneath their dignity.

"But the new Clurm will be of such magnificence!" asserted the lordling, seated as ever closest to the warmth of their tiny camp-fire; they dared not build a larger one, for fear of being spotted by the usurper's forces, who roamed free in the countryside while they hid among trees, being less beloved of the common folk. "It will be—it will be—Oh, I can see it now! Would you too could see its wonders! Would I could make you believe in its existence!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, who stood a little apart, leaning on his staff.

Next day the inevitable happened. In the morning they awoke convinced that their city was real, for they saw it all about them. Joyful, bent on their leader's errand, they set out for all points of the compass, and returned with eager young followers, just as he had predicted.

Who thereupon, not finding the grand city which members of the band believed they could see, set about them with cudgels and bound them hand and foot and committed them for lunatics. The lordling was not exempted from this treatment.

But the traveller, departing, found himself unable to avoid thinking about Stanguray.

Therefore he turned aside from the road which led to Wocrahn, and made his way to a green thicket in the midst of a perfectly circular expanse of hard clay, which neither rain nor thawing after snow could turn to mud. Here was imprisoned Tarambole, with sway over dryness, as Karth formerly over cold in the land called Eynuran: a being to whom the gift had not been granted to tell lies.

Within the thicket, concealed from sight of passers-by—which was as well, since lately the people of the region had taken much against magic—the traveller resigned himself to the performance of a ceremony none but he and Tarambole recalled. It gained him the answer to a single question, and it was not what he had looked forward to.

No, it was not, so Tarambole declared, an elemental ranged against him which drew his mind back and back, and back again to thoughts of Stanguray.

"Would that I might consult with Wolpec," murmured the traveller. But he knew not where that strange coy harmless spirit bided now; he had yielded too early to the blandishments of humans, and by his own volition had wasted his power to the point where it was needless to imprison him. He chose his own captivity. Much the same might be said for Farchgrind, who once or twice had provided intelligence for the traveller, and indeed for countless others.





There remained, of course, those whom he had only banished: Tuprid and Caschalanya, Queril and Lry. . . . Oh, indubitably they would know what was happening! It was quite likely they had set this train of events in motion. But to call on them, the most ancient and powerful of his enemies, when he was in this plight, weakened by puzzlement . . .

Had they set out to undermine him, knowing they could not meet him in fair fight?

Yet Tarambole who could not lie had said his disquiet was not due to the opposition of an elemental.

The gravely disturbing suspicion burgeoned in the traveller's mind that for the first (and the next word might be taken literally in both its senses) time a new enemy had arrayed against him.

New

Not an opponent such as he had vanquished over and over, but something original, foreign to his vast experience. And if it were not the Four Great Ones who had contrived so potent a device . . .

Then only one explanation seemed conceivable, and if it were correct, then he was doomed.

But his nature remained single, and it was not in him to rail against necessity. Necessarily he must continue on his way. He retrieved his staff and with its tip scattered the somewhat disgusting remains of what he had been obliged to use in conjuring Tarambole, and headed once more towards Wocrahin.

Where, in a tumbledown alley, a smith whose forge blazed and roared and stank yelled curses at his neighbours as he hammered bar-iron into complex shapes. His only audience was his son, a boy of ten, who hauled on the chain of the great leather bellows which blew his fire.

"Hah! They want me out of here because they don't like the noise, they don't like the smell, they don't like me— That's what it boils down to, they don't like me because my occupation's not genteel! But they buy my wares, don't they? Boy, answer when you're spoken to!"

But the boy had been at his work three years, and the noise had made him deaf, and inhalation of foul smoke had affected his brain, so he could only either nod or shake his head by way of answer. Fortunately this time he did the proper thing; he nodded. Thus assuaged, his father resumed his complaining.

"If they don't care to live hard by a forge, let 'em club together and buy me a house outside the town, with a stream beside it to turn a trip-hammer! Let 'em do something to help me, as I help them! After all, a forge must be built somewhere, right? They should see what it's like to live without iron, shouldn't they, boy?"

This time, by alternation, the youngster shook his head. Infuriated, the smith flung down his tools and bunched his fists.

"I'll teach you and the rest of 'em to make mock of me!" he roared. "Oh, that they could see what life is like without iron!"

"As you wish," the traveller said from a smoky corner, "so be it."

Whereupon the iron in the smithy rusted all at once: the anvil, the hammer-heads, the tongs, the nails, the cramps that held the massy wooden portion of the bellows, even the horseshoes waiting on the wall. The smith let out a great cry, and the neighbours came running. Such was their laughter that shortly the phrase, "like a smith without iron," entered the common parlance of Wocrahin. Indeed, he taught them to make mock . . .

But the traveller was ill pleased. This was not like his customary regulation of affairs. It was clumsy. It was more like the rough-and-ready improvisations of the times before Time.

And he could not cure himself of thinking about Stangaray.

In Teq they still gambled to the point of insanity, and might supplant right among its decadent people.

"No, you may not waste time in playing!" a woman scolded her son, dragging him back from a sandpit where a score of children were amusing themselves. "You're to be the greatest winner since Fellian, and support me in my old age. Ah, would I knew how to make you understand what I plan for you!"

"As you wish," sighed the traveller, who had taken station in the square where formerly the statue of Lady Luck upreared—where now greedy unscrupulous landlords sold a night's lodging in squalid hovels to those who believed sleeping here would bring good fortune.

The boy's eyes grew round and a look of horror

spread across his face. Then he sank his teeth in his mother's arm, deep enough to draw blood, and took to his heels screaming, to scrape a living as best he could among the other outcasts of this now dismal city, the better for his freedom.

Yet that also was unbefitting, in the traveller's view, and still he could not rid his mind of thoughts of Stanguray.

In Segramond folk no longer tended a grove of ash-trees. They had been felled to make a fence and grandstand around an arena of pounded rocks, where for the entertainment of the wealthy, savage beasts were matched with one another and against condemned criminals, armed or unarmed according to the gravity of their offence and the certainty of the jury which had heard the evidence. Today witnessed the bloody demise of a girl who had charged her respectable uncle with raping her.

"Now this," the traveller said under his breath, "is not as it should be. It smacks more of chaos, this indecision, than of the proper unfolding of Time. When all things have but a single nature, there will be no room for the doubt which requires settlement in this manner."

He waited. In a little the dead girl's uncle, resplendent in satin trimmed with fur, came weeping from the vantagepoint reserved for privileged onlookers. "Ah, if you but knew," he cried to fawning hangers-on, "how much it cost me to accuse my darling niece!"

"So be it," said the traveller, and by nightfall the people did indeed know what it had cost him, in perjuries to perjured witnesses. On the morrow he was kicked to death by a wild onager.

Yet and still the traveller felt himself infect with the foulness of the world, and could not release his mind from thinking about Stanguray.

Like Teq, Gryte was no longer rich, and on the marches of its land a new town had grown up called Amberlode. To it had removed the more enterprising of the old families from Gryte; against it the less enterprising were mouthing curses.

But the powers on which they called were petty compared to those which had carried Ys back across the boundary of Time and into Eternity—albeit briefly—so their impact on Amberlode was minimal. Realising this, a man who hated his younger brother for seizing an opportunity he had rejected cried aloud, and said, "Would it were I rather than he who enjoyed that fine new house in the new city!"

"As you wish," murmured the traveller, who had accepted the hospitality this man accorded grudgingly to travellers in order to acquire virtue against some misty hereafter.

And it was so; and because the younger brother under any circumstances was the more enterprising

and talented, and moreover understood how to have, his cursing was efficacious, and the fine new house collapsed to its occupants' vast discomfiture.

And that was wrong!

The realisation brought the traveller up short. There should have lain neither blame nor suffering on the brother who had chosen aright, yet here it came, and with brutal force. For as far back as he could recall it had been his intention that the literal interpretation he placed on the wishes he granted should be a means of ensuring justice. The suffering must be confined to those who had richly earned it. What was awry?

The constellations had not yet wheeled to the configuration marking the conclusion of his journey. By rights he should have continued in prescribed sequence from one stage of it to the next, to the next, to the next...

But he found he could not. If it were true that some hitherto unencountered foe, neither human nor elemental, now ranged against him, that implied a fundamental shift in the nature of all the realities. Beyond that, it hinted at something so appalling that he might as well abandon his task at once. He had believed his assignment binding, forever and forever, within and outside Time. But it was possible, to the One for Whom all things were possible—

He cancelled that thought on the instant. Completion of it would of itself wipe him from the record of what was, what might be, and what was as though it had never been. His status was, as he well knew, at best precarious.

Which made him think of the rope-walking children at Stanguray.

Which made him think on what he had said and done there.

Which made him take the most direct route thither, and immediately.

Which taught him the most painful lesson of his existence.

IV

Initially around Lake Taxhling there had been only reed huts wherein dwelt fisherfolk who well understood how to charm their way safely across its waters, and distinguish by simple conjuration those natural fishes which were safe to eat from those which had been transformed by the river Metamorphia and on which a geas lay.

Certain onerous duties bought them this privilege, but in general they regarded their prime deity Frah Frah as being exigit but not unkind.

Time wore on, though, and by degrees they quit performance of the rituals which had purchased their livelihood; in particular, they no longer ceremoni-

ally burnt down and rebuilt their homes twice annually.

By then it was no longer so essential to tell the nature of one's catch; the river's power was waning. Now and then someone died through carelessness, generally a child or an oldster; but the survivors shrugged it off.

Then, as the river's magic diminished further, certain nomads followed it downstream: traders, and pilgrims, and people who had so ill-used their former farms that the topsoil blew away, and criminal fugitives as well. Finding that on the far side of Lake Taxhling there was a sheer enormous drop, they decided to remain, and the original inhabitants—being peaceable—suffered them to do so.

Henceforward the reed huts were not burned because there were none; the newcomers preferred substantial homes of timber, clay, and stone. Henceforward the shrines dedicated to *Frah Frah* were increasingly neglected. Henceforward meat figured largely in the local diet, as fish had formerly; herds of swine were established in the nearby woodlands, and grew fat in autumn on acorns and beechmast, while sheep and goats were let loose on the more distant slopes, though the grazing was too poor for cattle. The way of life around Lake Taxhling was transformed.

There followed a succession of three relatively gentle invasions, by ambitious conquerors, each of which endowed the area with a new religion not excessively dissimilar from the old one. It was a reason for children to form gangs and stage mock battles on summer evenings, rather than a cause for adult strife, that some families adhered to *Yelb the Comforter* and others to *Ts-graeb the Everlasting* or *Honest Blunk*. They coexisted with fair mutual tolerance.

Altogether, even for someone like Orrish whose stock was unalloyed pre-conquest, and whose parents maintained a dignified pride in their seniority of residence, life on the edge of Taxhling was not unpleasant.

Or rather, it had not been until lately. Oh, in his teens—he had just turned twenty—he had been mocked because he confessed to believing in the fable told to children about a town below the waterfall with which there had once been trade, but he was strong and supple and could prove his point by scaling the ruined stairs, both ways, demonstrating that the idea was not wholly out of the question.

That, therefore, was endurable. So too was the military service imposed by the region's current overlord, Count Lashgar, on all between eighteen and twenty-ones. It was a nuisance; but it was imperative if one wished to marry; and it enabled youngsters to break free of their parents, which could not be bad. Because the count had no territorial am-

bitions and spent his time poring over ancient tomes, the most dangerous duties assigned to his troops consisted in keeping track of goats on hilly pastures, and the most unpleasant in the monthly shambles. There were too many people now for fish to feed them all, so the latest invader, Count Lashgar's grandfather, had exhibited a nest sense of household economy by decreeing that the slaughter of animals should henceforth be an army monopoly, thereby tidily combining weapons training (they were killed with sword and spear) with tax-collection (there was a fixed charge based on weight and species, which might be commuted by ceding one sheep of seven, one goat of six, and one hog of five), with religious duty (the hearts were saved to be offered on the altar of his preferred deity, *Ts-graeb the Everlasting*), and with—as he naively imagined—an increase in the fish supply. It seemed reasonable to expect that by establishing a shambles in the shallows of the lake one could contrive to give them extra nourishment.

The lake being sluggish, however, the stench grew appalling; moreover, it was the only source of drinking- and cooking-water. His son peremptorily removed the shambles to the very edge of the plateau, at the top of the waterfall, and his grandson Lashgar saw no grounds for disturbing this arrangement. Now and then in the old days one had seen, on the delta below, people shaking fists and shouting insults; but they were too far away to be heard; and none had the temerity to climb the ancient stairs and argue. Not since before Orrish was born had it been deemed advisable to maintain double guards along the rim of the cliff.

Maybe if that old custom had been kept up . . .

Perhaps, yes, things would not have taken such a horrifying turn around Taxhling. He would naturally not have been able to do what he was doing—deserting his post by night—without killing his companion or persuading him to come along; on the other hand, the necessity would not have arisen . . .

Too late for speculation. Here he was, scrambling down the cliff, repeating under cover of darkness his climb of five years ago, wincing at every pebble he dislodged, for the steps rocked and tilted and some had vanished for five or ten feet together. His muscles ached abominably; and, though the night was frosty, rivulets of perspiration made him itch all over. However, there was no turning back. He must gain the safety of the level ground below. He must let the people of Stanguray know what enormities one of their number was perpetrating, rouse them to anger and to action!

Under his cold-numbed feet a ledge of friable rock abruptly crumbled. Against his will he cried out as he tumbled into blackness. His memory of the climb

he had made when he was fifteen was not so exact that he knew how high he was, but he guessed he fell no more than twenty feet.

But he landed on a heap of small boulders, frost-fractured from the cliff, and felt muscles and sinews tearing like wet rags.

How now was he to bear a warning to Stanguray? And if not he, then who?

There was nothing else for it. Despite his agony, he must crawl onward. Even though the witch Cranca had been spawned among them, the people of Stanguray did not deserve the fate she planned. They had at least, presumably, had the sense to drive her out, instead of—like that damned fool Count Lashgar!—welcoming her and giving in to every one of her foul demands.

V

Autumn had begun to bite when the traveller returned to Stanguray. It was a clear though moonless night. Mist writhed over the marshes. The mud was stiff with cold, and here and there a shallow puddle was sufficiently free from salt to have formed a skim of ice.

Despite the chill, the rusk of blood was dense in the air.

But in the village of marble pillars and gaudy tilework there was no sign of life, save for suspicious birds and rats.

Unable at first to credit that the place was totally deserted, the traveller slackened the grip of the forces which held together his staff of curdled light. A radiance bright as the full moon's revealed it was only too true. Everywhere doors and shutters stood ajar. No chimney, even on the wealthiest homes, uttered smoke. The boats were gone from the quay; and some few poor household items lay on it, abandoned.

Yet this did not smack of a raid. There was no sign of violence—no fires had been started, no dead bodies lay untidy on the ground. This had been a planned and voluntary departure.

Moreover, as he abruptly realised, something else was wrong. He was immune to the night's freezing air, but not to the chill of dismay which this discovery evoked in him.

Litorgos was no longer penned between salt and silt. The elemental too was absent from this place.

Until this moment he had believed that in all of space and all of time none save he had been granted the power to bind and loose the elemental spirits. Could it be that to another the inverse of his gift had been assigned? Surely the One Who—

But if that were so, then Tarambole had lied. And if that were so, then the universe would become like

the pieces on a game-board, to be tipped randomly back into their box and played again with different rules. There was no sign of such a catastrophe: no comets, no eruptions, no dancing stars.

A new enemy.

More at a loss than ever before, he pondered and reviewed his knowledge, standing so still that hoarfrost had the chance to form on the hem of his black cloak. With all his powers of reasoning he was still far from an answer when he heard a thin cry, weak as a child's but far too bass.

"Help! Help! I can go no further!"

Half in, half out of a muddy channel, some three or four hundred paces towards the escarpment, he came upon the one who had shouted: a young man in leather jerkin, breeches and boots, whimpering against his will for the pain of torn ligaments in his leg.

"Who are you?" the traveller challenged.

"Orrish of Taxhling," came the faint reply.

"And your mission?"

"To warn the folk of Stanguray what doom's upon them! I never dreamed such horrors could be hatched in a human brain, but—Ow, ow! Curses on my hurt leg! But for it, I'd have been there long ere now!"

"To small avail," the traveller said, bending to haul the man clear of the icy water. "They're gone. All of them."

"Then my errand of mercy was in vain?" Orrish said blankly. And of a sudden he began to laugh hysterically.

"Not so," the traveller returned, touching with his staff the injured leg. At every contact a light shone forth, the colour of which humans had no name for. "There, how does it feel?"

Sobered by astonishment, Orrish rose incredulously to his feet, testing the damaged limb. "Why—why, it's a miracle!" he whispered. "Who are you, that you can work such magic?"

"I have many names, but a single nature. If that means aught to you, so be it; if not, and increasingly I find it does not, well and good. . . . With a name like Orrish, I take you to be of ancient Taxhling stock."

"You know our people?"

"I dare say I've known them longer than you," the traveller admitted. "What's amiss, that sent you on your desperate mission?"

"They've gone insane! A witch has come among us, dedicated to the service of Ts-graeb—or so she says—claiming to know how to make our lord Count Lashgar live for ever! Now me, I hold no brief against the worshippers of Ts-graeb, or anyone else, although in truth . . ." Orrish's tongue faltered.

With a hint of his customary dry humour the traveller said, "In truth you adhere to the cult of Frah

Frah, and you wear his amulet in the ancient and invariable place, and because your belt has come adrift from your breeches the fact is plainly discernible. I am pleased to learn Frah Frah is not wholly devoid of followers; his ceremonies were often very funny, in a coarse way; and among his favourite offerings was a hearty laugh. Am I not right?"

Frantically making good the deficiencies in his garb, Orrish said in awe, "But that was in my grandfather's day!"

"More like your three-times-great-grandfather's day," the traveller said matter-of-factly. "But you still haven't told me why you were so desperate to warn the folk of Stanguray."

Piecemeal, then, he extracted the whole story, and thereby learned that Tarambole, while of course he could not lie, had access to the power of ambiguity.

That discovery was a vast relief. But it still left a wholly unprecedented situation to resolve.

"This witch is called Crancina," Orrish said. "She came among us recently—last spring—and brought with her a familiar in the guise of a hunchbacked boy. They hailed from Stanguray, and at once everybody was prepared to accept them as marvel-workers, for in living memory none but I has attempted to scale the face of yon escarpment.

"We'd always regarded Count Lashgar as a harm-



less, bookish fellow. In shops and taverns one might hear people say with knowing nods and winks, 'One could do worse than live under such an overlord!' Confessedly, I've said and believed the same.

"Little did we know that he plotted with his books and incantations to find a means of outliving us all! But she did, the witch Crancina, and she came to him and said she knew what use could be made of the blood spilled from the beasts we kill each month at the dark of the moon. She said that once there was enough blood in the water of the lake . . . Sir, are you well?"

For the traveller had fallen silent and stock-still, gazing into the past.

In a little he roused himself enough to answer. "No! No, my friend, I am not well, nor is anything well! But at least I now comprehend what is the nature of my unprecedented enemy."

"Explain, then!" pleaded Orrish.

"She made out that once enough blood was in the water, it would turn to an elixir of long life, is that the case?"

"Why, yes! Moreover she declared it should be ample for all to drink, giving each of us an extra span of years!"

"In that she lied," the traveller said, flat-voiced.

"I have suspected so." Orrish bit his lip. "I won't presume to ask how you know—that you're a strange and powerful personage, my well-healed leg declares. . . . Would, though, I might give her the lie direct, on your authority! For what they propose up yonder, in my name, is so ghastly, so awful, so disgusting . . .!"

"It was this that drove you to desert your post?"

The young man gave a miserable nod. "Indeed, indeed. For, lacking as much blood as she maintained was requisite, they began to say, 'Are there not those who bleed at Stanguray? Did not Orrish clamber down and up the cliff? And must not human blood be more effective? Let us set forth and capture them, and drag them hither, and cut their throats to make the magic work!'"

"And what said Count Lashgar to this mad scheme?"

"Unless Crancina's rites succeed today, he'll give his soldiers orders for the mission."

"Who's making rope?"

The question took Orrish aback for a second; then he caught on and burst out laughing, not as before—halfway to hysteria—but with honest mirth, making an offering to Frah Frah.

"Why, I'm as dumb and blind as they! Surely it will call for miles of rope to fetch hundreds of unwilling captives over level ground, let alone drag them up the cliffs!"

"Such work is not in hand!"

"Why, no! Drunk on promises, the people care only

for butchery. Now it's at such a stage, those who set snares by night are ordered to bring their catch, still living, to be included in the daily ceremony. And woe betide those whose rabbits and hares and badgers are already dead!"

"I understand," the traveller said sombrely, and thought on an ancient ceremony, practised when the forces of Chaos were more biddable than now. Then, one had taken a shallow bowl, ideally of silver, incised with the character *harsht*, midmost of those in the Yuvallian script, and filled it with *waer*, and laid therein the germ of a homunculus, and cut one's finger and let three drops fall to mingle with the water, and thereupon the homunculus set forth to do one's bidding. Kingdoms had been overthrown that way.

What would betide when the ceremony was expanded to a whole great lake?

And particularly and essentially: this lake of all . . . !

"Sire," Orrish ventured anxiously, "you spoke just now of some enemy of yours. Is that the witch—is your enemy the same as ours? May we count you for an ally?"

The traveller parried the question. "What drove you to climb down the cliff by night? Fear that you, not worshipping *Ta-græb*, would be excluded from the universal benefit of immortality?"

"No—no, I swear on my father's honour!" Orrish was sweating; the faint light of the false dawn glistened on his forehead. "But—well, in the cult of the god I have been raised to worship, it is said that pleasure bought at the cost of another's suffering is no pleasure at all. So it seems to me with this pre-

tended immortality—even given that that is the goal of those cruel ceremonies, which you contest. How can a life worth living be purchased at the expense of so much viciousness?"

"Then let us return together to Taxhling," the traveller said with decision. "Your wish is granted. You shall give the witch the lie direct."

"But is she your enemy?" Orrish persisted.

"No, my friend. No more than you are."

"Then—who . . . ?"

Because the question was posed with an honest need to know, the traveller was constrained to answer, after long reluctance.

"That which is against me is within me."

"You speak in riddles!"

"So be it! I had rather not let it be noised abroad that I overlooked so crude a truth: this is my fault. For the first time, I set forth to fight *myself*."

VI

Blessedly warm in the room assigned to her at Count Lashgar's residence—for here on the plateau they could afford to be prodigal with fuel, and a log-fire had burned all night two steps away from her bed—Crancina woke with a sudden sense of excitement such as she had only felt once before: back in the spring, when it had suddenly dawned on her what use could be made of all that blood fouling Stanguray's river.

A serving-maid drowsed on a stool in the chimney-corner. Shouting to rouse her, Crancina threw aside the thick coverlet of her bed.

Today, yes today, her efforts were sure to be re-



warded! Then let that slimy Count go whistle for his dreamed-of immortality! He was on all fours with the greedy men who had demanded her hand in marriage back at Stanguray, when what they wanted was not her, but the profits of her cook-shop and her sweet-water spell.

Today would teach him, and tomoerow would teach the world, a lesson never to be forgotten.

Humming a merry tune, she wrapped herself snug in a sheepskin cape against the chill early-morning air.

"My lord! My lord! Wake up!" whispered the serving-man whose duty it was to rouse Count Lashgar. "Mistress Crancina is certain of success today and sent her girl to tell me so!"

Muzzily peering from among high-piled pillows, the Count demanded, "What's worked the trick, then? The extra animals I ordered to be brought in from snares and traps?"

"My lord, I'm not party to your high councils," was the reproachful answer. "But surely in one of your books the secret's explained?"

"If it had been," Lashgar sighed, forcing himself to sit up, "I'd not have waited this long for the fulfilment of my lifetime dreams."

Through the mists which haunted the edges of the lake a band of shivering soldiers marched with drums and gongs; and on hearing these people turned out enthusiastically, forgoing breakfast save for a hasty crust and a mouthful of strong liquor. In the old days the morning of a shambles was one to be avoided; now, miraculously, it had been transformed into the signal event of the month . . . today more than ever, for the rumours had already taken rise.

"Today's the day! Crancina told the count—it's bound to work today! Just think! Maybe some of us, maybe all of us, will be deathless by tonight!"

Only a few cynical souls were heard to wonder aloud what would happen if it proved there was power enough in the bloody water to make one person live for ever, and no more. Who would get it, if

it weren't the witch?

But those were generally of the aboriginal lake-side stock, whose ancestors had had their fill of magic long ago. Those who worshipped Te-græb the Everlasting, as Lashgar did—and his adorers had grown vastly more numerous since the witch arrived—clamored loudly for the favour of their deity, and arrived at the lake's shore singing and clapping their hands.

They raised a vast cheer when Lashgar and Crancina appeared, preceded by the image of Te-græb in the guise of an old and bearded wiseacre, which was borne on the shoulders of six men-at-arms. The procession was flanked by the priests and priestesses of Yell the Comforter, portrayed as having nipples all over her naked bulk from toes to hairline, and the handful who still adhered to Honest Blunk, whose image and symbol was a plain white sphere. No believers in Frah Frah were bold enough to parade their creed, and indeed scarcely any remained.

But, bringing up the very tail, here came a hunch-backed boy in jester's garb, with bells on hat and heels, capering and grimacing as he feigned to beat the onlookers with his wand of office: a pig's bladder on a rod tied with gaudy ribbons. Even the followers of Honest Blunk were glad to crack a smile at sight of him, for a bitter wind souffled over the plateau.

"And where," the traveller murmured as he contrived to fall in beside the jester, "did you get that partioured finery?"

"It's not stolen, if that's what you're thinking!" came the sharp reply. "It belonged to the jester whom Count Lashgar's grandfather kept, and I have been given it by one of the Count's retainers. Who are you that you put such a question to me?—? Why, I recall you, and only too well." At once the boy ceased his awkward parody of a dance. "It was the very day after you spoke with her that my sister took this crazy notion into her head, and forced me hither up the cliffs! More than once I thought I would die, but my deformity has luckily left my torso light enough for my arms to bear the weight of, and where she almost fell I could cling on for us both . . . But often I feel I'd rather have let her fall than be condemned to my present lot!"

"Is it no better than at Stanguray?"

"Perhaps by a hair's breath, now I've appropriated these clothes and wand." Josipil struck the traveller with it, scowling. "But they made me out to be Crancina's familiar at first, and wanted to feed me on hot coals and aqua regia. Besides, they have no sense of humour, these people! If they did, would they not long ago have laughed Crancina out of countenance?"

"You are absolutely correct," the traveller agreed.

solemnly. "And therein lies the key to fulfilment of a wish you made in my hearing. Do you recall it?"

The hunchback gave his usual crooked shrug. "It would have been the same as what I say to everybody, except of course my sister: that one day I should find a means of freeing myself from her."

"And making your way in the world against all odds?"

"Yes, I've said that over and over, and doubtless to you."

"Meaning it?"

Jospil's eyes flashed fire. "Every word!"

"Today, then, is your chance to make the most of your jester's rôle and achieve your ambition simultaneously."

Jospil blinked. "You speak so strangely," he muttered. "Yet you came to the hearth like anybody, and you were politer to my sister than she deserved, and—yes, it was precisely from the moment of your visit that she took these crazy notions into her head, and . . . I don't know what to make of you, I swear I don't."

"Count yourself fortunate," the traveller said dryly, "that you are not called on to do so. But remember that there is magic abroad today, if not the kind Count Lashgar is expecting, and that you are a crux and focus of it. Sir Jester, I bid you good morning!"

And with a deep-dipping bow, and an inclination of his staff, and a great flapping swirl of his black cape, the traveller was gone about his business.

VII

How it was that he was back at his guard-post in time to reclaim his spear and shield and greet his dawn relief before his absence was noticed, Orrish could afterwards never quite recall—not what had become of his mysterious companion once they were on the plateau.

But he did remember one thing with perfect clarity. He had been promised the chance to give the witch the lie direct. Anxious, he awaited his opportunity. There seemed little chance of it happening, though, for immediately on returning to barracks he had been cornered by a sergeant with a squad lacking one man, to collect the night's trapped animals and bring them to the lakeside to have their life's blood let. In all their various tones they squeaked and whimpered, and their cries made a hideous cacophony along with the bleating and grunting of the few remaining domestic animals, pent in folds of hurdles within scent of the bloody water. At this rate of slaughter, though there would be more pickled meat than their barrels could hold and more smoked meat than hooks to hang it on, which would set the community through the winter, there would be no breeding-stock to start again in

the summer. Orrish shook his head dolefully, dreading the assignment he had been given almost as much as he loathed the notion of kidnapping and killing the people of Stanguray.

That, at least, if the traveller was to be trusted, was no longer a possibility.

But where was the traveller? Orrish searched the vicinity with worried eyes. Like all those who came of the ancient Taxhling stock, he had been raised to distrust magic and its practitioners; and the way his leg had been healed left no room for doubt that the man in the black cloak trafficked in such arts. Was he—like the witch Crancina—deceitful and self-serving?

Orrish started a little. How did he know the witch was defrauding the people? Why, because the traveller in black had told him so. Maybe he should believe what the rest of his folk believed, rather than taking the word of a stranger?

Biting his lip in terrible confusion, he was distracted by a shout from the sergeant, calling the soldiers to attention at the appearance of Count Lashgar. Numbly obeying, Orrish wished desperately that the traveller would come back; everything had seemed so simple in his company.

Along with the other young conscripts, he awaited the order to butcher the pitiable beasts.

There were obligatory cheers and shouts; they did not last long, however, because everybody was too eager to hear what Crancina proposed to do today. Graciously bowing from side to side as he took station on a kind of dais erected over the water, Lashgar addressed his subjects in a surprisingly large voice for so slim and short a man.

"We are promised marvels!" he declared. "You want to see them as much as I do! I'll waste no time on specifying, therefore, but let Mistress Crancina have her way!"

Everybody brightened at the brevity of his introduction. And then quietened, and shivered. Even while Lashgar was speaking, Crancina had thrown aside her thick sheepskin cape and begun to make passes in the air, muttering to herself the while. The words could not be made out even at close quarters, yet there was such a resonance to them that if one caught their slightest echo it could send a tremor down the spine.

Now and then she felt in a pouch hung at her girdle and tossed a pinch of powder into the water, rather as though she were seasoning a soup.

Along with all the rest, the traveller was mightily impressed. This was the first occasion in more of his visits to this world than he cared to try and count, when he had witnessed a genuinely new magic rite. Even though the change might be classed as more quantitative than qualitative, the purpose Crancina

was putting her work to was radically different from anything he could recall.

Now and then in the past he had wondered whether cookery, where the practitioner might begin with something not only unpalatable but actually poisonous, and conclude with something not only digestible but delicious, might not be the ultimate destiny of temperaments which in earlier ages would have led people to meddle in magic. He made a firm resolve to keep a careful eye on cooks in future.

For this recipe, at least, was working fine.

Much as though it were milk being curdled by rennet, the water of Lake Taxhling was solidifying. Instead of the random patterns made by wind and wave, shapes were discernible on the surface; and though they jostled and shifted, they did not break up any longer. The onlookers cohered and coaxed, while Count Lashgar, barely disguising his incredulity, tried not to jump up and down for joy.

The shapes were not altogether comfortable to look at; however, they were visible, and little by little they were beginning to stand up from the surface, first as shallowly as ripples, then with more and more protuberance. Also they enlarged. Somewhat separated from each other, they numbered altogether a thousand or two; and their forms were strange beyond description. If this one was reminiscent of a claw-tipped fern-frood, its neighbour hinted at a dishmop with vastly enlarged tentacles; if another called to mind a hog's head with holes in it, the next resembled a mouse with twenty legs.

The only thing they had in common, barring their present almost stillness, was their coloration. They were the grey of common pumice-stone, and bobbed on the now oily surface of the lake, which had congealed to form them, with a motion as sluggish as though time had slowed to a twentieth of its regular rate.

"Magic!" murmured the onlookers, delighted. "Magic indeed!"

"But she is a liar—she is!" came a sudden cry from the direction of the stock-pens, where soldiers were dutifully readying the last of the animals to be killed. "The witch Crancina is a liar!"

Everyone reacted, especially Lashgar and Crancina herself; the Count shouted an order to the sergeant to quiet the man who had called out, while she shot one nervous glance in that direction and kept on with her recital of cantrips, faster and faster. The images forming on the lake wavered, but grew firm again.

"Silence that man!" the sergeant bellowed, and two of his companions tried to take Orrish by the arms. He shoved his shield in the face of one, breaking his nose, and wended the other with the butt-end of his spear, on his way to the nearest point of

vantage, the shambles stone—formerly at the far end of the lake near the waterfall, but lately brought back to this spot in the interests of conserving the spilled blood. It was a block of granite with channels cut in the upper face for the blood to drain from. Taking stance on it, Orrish waved his spear across the waters of the lake.

"How did she expect to get away with it?" he roared. "We know what these apparitions are!"

They wavered again, but remained solid, and were now stock-still, as rigid as glass, and as fragile.

Suddenly, cautiously, a few of the watchers—mostly elderly—nodded. Realising they were not alone, they drew themselves proudly upright and did it again more vigorously.

"And we know they have nothing to do with immortality!" Orrish yelled at the top of his lungs. "Get away!"—kicking out at the sergeant who was trying to snare him by the ankles. "I don't mean you or your blockhead of a master the Count! I mean us, who've been here long enough not to be cheated by the witch! Look at her! Look at her! Can't you read fear and terror on every line of her face?"

Crancina was wildly shouting something, but the wind had risen in the past minute or two, and the words were carried away. Beside her, paling, Count Lashgar was signalling to his bodyguard to close in; the priests of Blunk and Yelb and Ts-grab were likewise huddling together for comfort.

Meantime the images formed on the lake remained unmoving.

"And for the benefit of you who weren't lucky enough to be brought up like me in a household where they still know about this kind of thing," Orrish blasted, "I'll explain! In the remote and distant past our superstitious ancestors believed that the weird and unique objects which came down the river—those which had been of a sinking nature floated, obviously—all these objects were divine and deserving of worship. So they set up shrines, and made offerings, and called on them when reciting hearth-spells, and the rest of it. But at last a sensible teacher arose among us and asked why we had so many petty deities when we could contrive one with all their best attributes and none of their worst. The people marvelled and wondered and agreed, and that was how we came to worship Frah Frah! And when we had all consented to the change, the old gods were carried to the lake and thrown back in, to lie on the bottom until the end of the world. And so would they have done, but for Crancina! Ask her now what they have to do with immortality for us, or even her and Lashgar!"

"This is all a falsehood!" Crancina gasped. "I know nothing of ancient gods such as you describe!"

"But do you know anything of immortality?" Lashgar demanded. Seizing a sword from the nearest of his guardsmen, he levelled it at her breast.

"Of course she doesn't!" came a crowing voice. "She's fit to run a cookshop, and no more, and that's what she did in Stanguray! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-haw!"

And Jospil in his jester's guise frog-hopped towards his sister with a donkey-loud bray of laughter.

Startled, about to launch another broadside of invective, Orrish high on his rock checked, and looked towards Jospil, and against all his best intentions had to grin. The grin turned to a chuckle; the chuckle became a roar of merriment, and he had to lean on his spear for support as he rocked back and forth with tears streaming from his eyes. The mirth was so contagious that, without knowing what was funny, small children echoed it; and tending them their parents could not help but giggle, at the least; and that also spread. While Lashgar and Crancine and the more pompous of the attendant priests—of whichever denomination—looked scandalised and shouted orders which went disregarded by their subordinates, the entire crowd was caught up in one monstrous eruption of hilarity. The eldest of the onlookers, hobbling and toothless, who were as much at a loss about the proceedings as the babes in arms, cackled along with the rest, until the welkin seemed to ring with the sound.

And it did.

Echoed, re-echoed, amplified, the laughter started to resonate. There was a sort of buzzing which filled the air, making it denser than was normal. The vibrations fed on one another; they became painful to the ears; they set the teeth on edge, they shrilled and rasped and ground. Here and there among the throng people looked frightened and cast about for a way of escape. But there was none. The whole huge bowl which constituted the plateau of Lake Taxhling had become a valley of echoes, where sound—instead of dying away—increased in volume, and intensity, and harshness.

All this while the accidental creations of the river once known as Metamorphis, conjured back to the surface of the lake, stood utterly still... until they began to tremble under the impact of the noise.

Suddenly a thing like a walrus with a flower for a head cracked sharply across. A sprinkling of fine powder drifted into the air, dancing in time with the vibrations.

Then a curiously convoluted object, half slender and half bulky as though a giant dragonfly had miscegenated with a carthorse, shattered into tiny fragments. At once there was a rush into the vacancy

from either side. Something not unlike a colossal fist, with feathery excrescences, collided with a great hollow structure and reduced it to tinkling shards.

The laughter took on a rhythmical pattern. Now it could be discerned that whenever it reached a certain pitch of intensity another of the objects Crancine had conjured forth broke apart; each such breaking entailed another, and then others. The watchers, who for a moment had been frightened, found this also very amusing, and their mirth redoubled until all were gasping for breath.

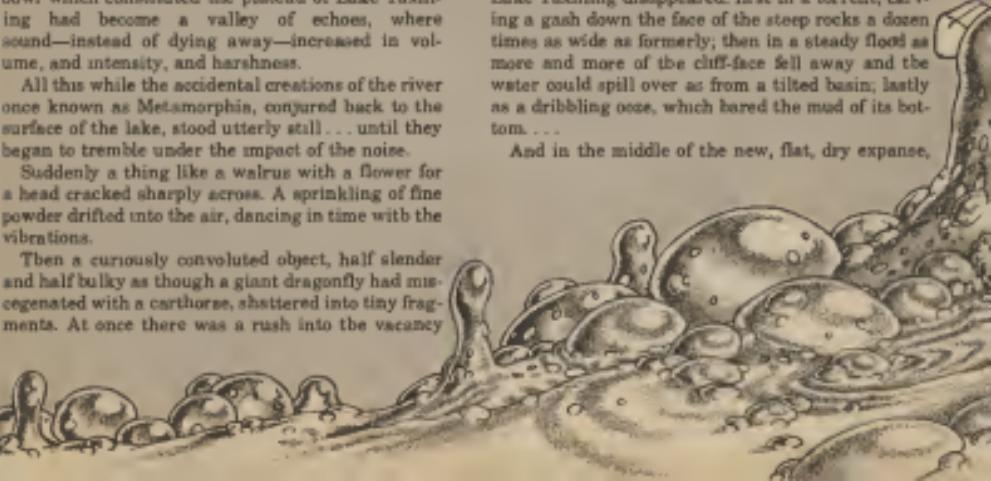
Into dust vanished the last relics of articles cast long ago from the citadel of Acromel; into sparkling crystals and jagged fragments dissolved what had once been sacrifices, and weapons, and the bodies of and drunken fools, and those of condemned criminals, and the carcasses of careless animals, and the husks of insects, and luck-offerings, and deadlands, and stolen treasure abandoned by its thieves, and fish which had swum from higher reaches of the river, and all sorts of casual rubbish, and leaves and twigs and branches tossed into the water by children at their play, and accidental conformations created by the perversity of the river itself out of lumps of mud which tumbled from its banks.

Instead of a horde of weird fantastical solid objects there was for a moment a silvery shimmering expanse. Precisely then the laughter reached its peak, and every gust was like a blow from a gigantic hammer, descending so fast that the very air grew solid at the impact.

On the third blow, the plateau split. Those who were closest to the cliff fell back from it, shouting, all thought of amusement forgotten. The earth trembled underfoot, and a jagged cleft appeared across the bed of the lake, beginning where the river had tumbled down the escarpment.

In one—two—three violent shifts of colossal mass, Lake Taxhling disappeared: first in a torrent, carving a gash down the face of the steep rocks a dozen times as wide as formerly; then in a steady flood as more and more of the cliff-face fell away and the water could spill over as from a tilted basin; lastly as a dribbling ooze, which bared the mud of its bottom...

And in the middle of the new, flat, dry expanse,





a statue: a little awry from the vertical, and draped moreover with garlands of grey-green weed, but the solitary object not affected by the pounding of the laughter which had smashed all of Crancina's evocations into rubble, and intact enough after its long submersion for it to be instantly recognisable.

The first to identify it was Orrish, regaining his feet after having been knocked down by the earth-tremors. For a long moment he gazed at it in disbelief. Then, in sudden frantic haste, he clawed open the belt holding his leather breeches, and produced the amulet he secretly wore.

Holding it aloft, he shouted, "Frah Frah! Have we not at last given you the offering you most desire? Laughter has been scant since you departed! And there's a bigger joke than all the rest!"

Lifting his spear, he pointed at Lashgar and Crancina. The pattern of the rift breaching the lake-floor was such that the little promontory where they had taken up their positions was isolated between two crevasses.

As though the spear had been a signal, the turfed surface tipped and with a sighing noise subsided. The Count, and the witch, and the priests, and the idola, and all their hangers-on were abruptly floundering waist-deep in the foulest possible kind of muck. With every frantic move they sprayed it over themselves, until they were unrecognizable.

"A satisfactory outcome, after all," the traveller said, putting by the staff which had dislodged the promontory. "But it was a near squeak. Still, this time the amusement I hear is unfurled."

Indeed, there had been one person agile enough to escape the general muddying of the Count's party; and now in his gaudy clothes of red and yellow he was leaping up and down on safe dry land, waving his bladder-tipped wand as if to conduct the orchestra of laughs emanating from the crowd.

One final touch...

The traveller waited for precisely the correct instant; then, with a tap of his staff on the ground, he ensured that just as Jospil pointed towards it, the statue of Frah Frah bowed forward, overbalanced, fell smack on its face, and disappeared into the yielding mud, over which already the clear stream of the river was coursing in search of its future channel.

Now the laughter rang out again, and the people dispersed good-humouredly enough despite the problem—to be solved on the morrow—of what they would do to gain their livings now. A few daring boys hurled lumps of mud at Lashgar and Crancina and the priests, but the pastime stalled rapidly, and they too made for their shattered homes.

Apart from those stuck in the mud, and the traveller himself, after a few minutes the only ones left

were Jospil and Orrish. Despondent, gripped by a sense of anticlimax, they made their way around the edge of the lake and halted where they could watch the struggles of those who were entrapped.

Shortly they grew aware of another beside them.

VIII

It is not given to many to enjoy their heart's desire," murmured the traveller. "Did you enjoy it?"

"I . . ." Not knowing quite whether he was speaking, nor whether he was speaking to somebody, Orrish licked his lips. "I guess I'm glad to have made the proper offering to Frah Frah. But as for tomorrow . . ." He shrugged. "Things can never be the same."

"Interesting," said the traveller. "One might say the same about Chao, yet here we are at a point where its forces so much wane that laughter serves to defeat them. . . . Nonetheless, in times to come you will be remembered, and even honoured, as the man who gave the witch the lie direct. And you, Jospil, even though you are not likely to be revered, you may henceforward pride yourself on having broken free of the witch's tyranny to make your way in the world against all odds."

"If that be so," answered the hunchback sharply, "I reckon little of it. Was my sister a witch before you came to us at Stanguray?"

The traveller perforce was discreetly silent for a while; then said at last, "I should like you to know: it is an earnest of the fulfilment of my task that you relish my aid so much less than what you have previously accomplished on your own."

"Oh, it's not that," sighed Jospil. "It's . . . Well, I don't honestly understand! What was Crancina up to when she forced me to quit our home in search of Count Lashgar?"

"She had made a wish, and I was bound to grant it."

"A wish . . . ?" Jospil's eyes grew round. "Of course! I'd half-forgotten! To know what use might be made of all the blood being spilled up here!"

"Your memory is exact."

"And she discovered, or worked out, that it could be used to revive those strange and ancient things from the bottom of the lake. . . . How?"

"Yes, how?" chimed in Orrish. "And to what end?"

"Jospil knows the answer to half that question," said the traveller with a wry smile.

"You mean . . . ?" The hunchback bit his thumb, pondering. "Ah! We only spoke of half her wish just now. The other part concerned her being in charge."

"As you say."

"But if part was granted, why is the other part not? Why is she not in charge completely, of everything, which I'm sure would suit her perfectly?"

"Because you wished to break free of her against all odds," the traveller answered. "And it so happens that those conflicting wishes which I grant tend to be loaded in favour of whoever cares less for himself, or herself, in the upshot."

He added sternly, "But in your case, boy, it was a close call!"

Jospil gave his sly frog's grin. "Well, at least I have a trade now," —he slapped the traveller with his beak— "and there will be a great dispersion from Taxhling, in all directions. From Lashgar's retainer who gave me this jester's outfit I've learned that a comedian at court may be a man of influence; certainly my involuntary benefactor was, who served Lashgar's grandfather until he was beheaded."

"You're prepared to run that risk?" Orrish demanded, aghast.

"Why not?" Jospil said, spreading his hands. "It's better than some risks we take for granted, isn't it? A moment of glory redeems an age of suffering. . . . But one more thing, sir, if I may trespass on your patience. What did my sister hope to achieve, if it was not to make herself immortal?"

"To re-enact a certain ceremony formerly involving a homunculus."

Jospil blinked. "That means nothing to me!" he objected. "Nor would it have done to her when you called at our cookshop that time! But for your intrusion, we might still be there, and—"

"And she might still be pronouncing her sweet-water cantrip at every dark of the moon."

"Exactly!" Jospil rose awkwardly to his feet. "Sir, I hold you entirely to blame for the predicament we're all cast into!"

"Even though you so much desired to be rid of your sister's tyranny, and you are?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Ah, well!" —with a sigh. "I deserve these reproaches, I admit. Since but for me your sister would never have known how reviving the strange creations of Metamorphin and imbuing them with blood could have made her mistress of the world."

Orrish's jaw dropped; a second later, Jospil clutched the hem of the traveller's cloak.

"She could have done that?"

"Why, beyond a peradventure! What magic is left nowadays is residual, by and large, and the bed of Lake Taxhling was the repository of an enchantment such as few contemporary wizards would dare risk."

"I could have been half-brother to the ruler of the world!" Jospil whispered, having paid no attention to the last statement.

"Indeed you could," the traveller said calmly, "if you genuinely believed that a moment of glory redeems an age of suffering—and, I assure you, had she become ruler of the world she would have under-

stood how to inflict suffering."

Frowning terribly, Jospil fell silent to reflect on what had been said, and Orrish ventured, "Sir, will you stay with us to rectify the consequences of your actions?"

There was a long, dead pause; the traveller hunched gradually further and further into the concealment of his hood and cloak.

Finally he said, as from a vast distance, "The consequences of my actions? Yes!

"But never the consequences of yours."

There followed a sudden sense of absence, and in a little while Jospil and Orrish felt impelled to go and join the rest of the people, clearing the débris left by the earthquake.

Which, of course, was all that had really happened . . . wasn't it?

"

IX

Litorges," said the traveller in the privacy of his mind, as he stood on a rocky outcrop overlooking the salt-and-silt delta being transformed by the outgush of water from on high. Already the pillars of Stanguray were tilting at mad angles; marble slabs and tiled facades were splashing into the swollen river. "Litorges, you came closer to deceiving me than any elemental in uncounted aeons!"

Faint as wind coughing in dry branches, the answer came as though from far away.

"But you knew. You knew very well."

And that was true. Silent awhile, the traveller reflected on it. Yes indeed; he had known, though he had not paid attention to the knowledge, that when he granted Crancina her wish he was opening the bonds which held Litorges. For the sole and solitary and unique fashion in which the blood spilled into the river at Taxhling might be turned to the purpose Crancina had in view was by the intervention of an elemental. So much blood had been spilled the world over, another few thousand gallons of it was trivial, except . . .

And therefore Tarambole had told the truth. It was not an elemental working against the traveller which called him back to Stanguray.

It was an elemental working with him.

For otherwise the wish could never have been granted.

"There was a time," the traveller said in this confessional, "when I was ready to believe that the One Who—"

"She does not change her mind," came the sharp retort.

"She has not done so," the traveller corrected. "But as the One to Whom all things are possible . . ."

"Then if that may prove to be the case, reward me

straight away, before the unthinkable occurs!"

"Reward you? For deceiving me?"

"For working with you, instead of against you?"

The traveller considered awhile; then he said, "I find that while I am not constrained to grant the wish of an elemental, I have done it in the past and am therefore not debarred from doing so. Besides, I am inclined to favour you, inasmuch as you foresaw the need for the people of Stanguray to evacuate their homes and costrained that they should do so before the flood came pouring down from Taxhling. What then is your wish?"

"I would cease!"

The fury behind the message made the ruined plateau tremble one more time, and people rescuing their belongings from half-wrecked houses redoubled their efforts.

"Once I and all were free and we could play with the totality of the cosmos! Once we could roam at large and transform galaxies at our whim, breaking the rope of time and making it crack like a whip! Then we were caught and bound, and pent as you pent me, and I know, in the very core and centre of my being, this imprisonment will never cease.

"So let me cease!"

For a long, long moment the traveller remained impassive, reflecting on what a change Litorgos had just wrought. Now the balance had been tipped; now

the triumph he looked forward to was certain—always excepting the intervention of the Four Great Ones, whom he could only banish, who might return.

But who would be insane enough to open a door for Tugrid and Caschalaava, Quoril and Lry—even if anybody remembered their existence?

With a great sigh of contentment the traveller said aloud, "In Eternity the vagaries of chaos permit even death to be reversed. In Time the certainties of reason insist that even elementals may be—dead."

For another hour the flood continued to wash away both sand and silt from the area where Litorgos had been, and was no longer.

Later, the settlements which had surrounded Lake Taxhling were overthrown by further earth-movements; and at last there was a vast slumping of the escarpment, such that half the old delta was bidden under scree and mud.

And in due time, when people came and settled thereabouts, ignorant of what cities had stood on the same site before—though not wholly the same, for the coastline also changed—it was held to be a pleasant and fortunate ground, where generations prospered who knew nothing about magic, or elemental spirits, or rivers running stinking-red with blood.







○ All over the world, people love to watch cartoons. In France and West Germany, Walt Disney's *The Rescuers* outgrossed *Star Wars*. For decades, animation has held a fascination for people of all ages. While some feel that cartoons are for children, one just needs to see the audience at a Betty Boop retrospective, or the compilation feature *Bugs Bunny, Superstar* of a few years ago to see just who watches cartoons.

Cartoon animation (as opposed to stop-motion animation, which we may cover in a future column) is increasing in popularity every year. Recent animated features have made incredible amounts of money; and, while money isn't everything, it is a good indicator of how many people went to see a given film. Ralph Bakshi's *Lord*

of the Rings took in \$25 million domestically, which is a new record for the first release of an animated film. *The Rescuers* took in \$45 million worldwide, another record for a first release.

A look at the news and reviews section of any installment of this column will show that there is much ado in Hollywood over animation. New animated features and shorts are being announced every week. Someone must be watching them.

But why are people so interested in animated films? Using animation, a feature film takes far longer to make than with live action: the average, fully-animated feature takes three or more years to make; the average live-action film takes a year or less.

Animation has the advantage that you can do things in it that would be totally unacceptable,

totally unbelievable in a live-action film. A live-action film, even the most expensive, special-effects-laden production, is a reflection of the world we live in—our reality. While our willing suspension of disbelief will allow us to accept extraterrestrial aliens, faster-than-light space travel, and a plethora of other as yet impossible things, certain ideas must remain constant. In the reality in which we live, foxes, for example, are smallish woodland creatures who walk on all fours. If you were watching a live action film in which a human-being-sized fox walked on his hind legs, dressed in human clothing, and talked, you wouldn't believe it. No matter how well made the costume, or how well done the special effects you would not be able to accept that fox as being real.

However, in Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* we have no trouble accepting Honest John as being real. In some animated films, all of the characters are anthropomorphic animals, so accepting a talking fox as real wouldn't seem unusual. However, except for Jiminy Cricket, all of the other characters in *Pinocchio* are human. Yet a walking, talking, human-sized fox fits right in.

Animated films are cartoons. They are not a direct reflection of reality but are, instead, an exaggerated image of reality. As such, they have a flexibility, a looseness which allows them to take certain liberties with reality and which allows us to accept those liberties as real. With no other filmic medium could this be done.

Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) with a tauntaun in 'The Empire Strikes Back,' upcoming sequel to *Star Wars*

Scene from Walt Disney's *The Rescuers*.

THE CHANGING FACE OF ANIMATION

In the United States, unfortunately, animation is largely thought to be a medium for children's entertainment. Even though the short cartoons of the mid 1930s and 1940s were obviously made with the adult moviegoer in mind, somehow the children's image was applied to the art form and stuck. This is probably because of the fairy-tale subject matter of many of the early films; but anyone watching and listening to the puns, references, double entendres, and other gags included in those would realize who the intended audience was.

In much of Europe, animation is considered in a different light. Rather than being discounted as worthless for 'serious' projects, it is looked upon as a legitimate art form. There are theaters in Paris that show nothing but animated films. They are viewed, critiqued, discussed, and revered there much the way film buffs look at *Citizen Kane* or *Psycho* here.

But things are beginning to change in this country. More and more people are becoming interested in animation as an art form. Some schools are offering classes in animation, or at least including information on it as part of their programs in film. And not just art

schools and colleges, but some high schools are doing this as well.

The subject matter being chosen for animated films in this country is changing. While animation has long been used as a teaching aid (the United States military, for example, has hundreds of animated instructional cartoons) and for propaganda purposes (especially during World War II), most of our shorts and features have been fairly lightweight stuff. Little of the heavy, philosophical dogma which shows up in much of the animation from behind the Iron Curtain has shown up in the works of Western animators until recently.

At the forefront of animation today are two companies:

Walt Disney Productions is still the predominant force in animation the world over. Disney has an international film distribution network that provides their films with more and better exposure than any other animation company could hope for. Disney also is the only American animation company with enough financial backing to be able to spend the time it takes to produce high-quality full animation.

The other field-leading company is Ralph Bakshi Productions. Not having the financial cushion of a major corporation like Disney, Bakshi's efforts are spent in attempts at innovation. Clearly, Bakshi's experimentation with such varied stories as *Fritz the Cat*, *Wizards*, and *Lord of the Rings* has broken new ground and increased the audience for animation in this country.

Films like *Lord of the Rings* and Martin Rosen's production of *Watership Down* have wrenching commercial animation from its comfortable spot on the fairy-tale shelf of the library into the area of literature. This is not a comment just on the type of story material involved, but the level as well. No longer are animated films always rated G. This is the start of a series of PG-rated animated films.

Animation, in order to survive, must capture the adult audience. Many of the adults who used to revel in animated shorts and

Ross Martin, Jo Ann Harris, and Robert Conrad appear in *The Wild, Wild West Revisited*.

features fled the theaters in the 1950s and 1960s, when the concept of 'animation is for children' took hold of the bankers and financiers who run the movie industry and gave us the kind of material that is seen on television on Saturday mornings.

That audience must be won back, as well as new viewers. And the largest group of moviegoers is the College Crowd. College-age people spend more money per capita on movies than do any other age group. And it is very



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difficult to get those people into a theater to see a film rated G. When *Star Wars* was before the rating board of the Motion Picture Association of America, the board split evenly on whether to give the film a G or PG rating, and left it up to the film company to decide what they wanted. Among several factors used to decide on going with a PG-rating was the desire to bring in the college-age group.

I went to Disney Studios and spoke with Wolfgang ("Woolie") Reitherman and Don Bluth about their, and the studio's, views on the changes happening in animation. Woolie Reitherman is one of Disney's fabled "nine old men," the men who were with Walt and the studio almost from the beginning, doing the animation, directing, etc., bringing the characters to life. Woolie is no longer animating, but is still active at the studio, working as producer on the studio's current animated film, *The Fox and the Hound*. Don Bluth, who has been with Disney's animation department since the mid-1960s, is generally considered the leader of the new guard of animators at Disney Studios. He worked as producer-director on Disney's Christmas featurette, *The Small One*.

I put the same basic few questions to each of these men, and asked them to comment. Because of the way we discussed the questions, the conversations tended to ramble. The following are not exact quotes, but are true to the nature of the comments.

Question: With films like Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* and Martin Rosen's *Watership Down* breaking new ground for animated films, what changes do you see occurring?

WOOLIE REITHERMAN: "Subject matter is the biggest change happening. Of course, the heavier, adult themes have been with us for a while. We've looked at them before. *Fantasia* was our first thrust into fantasy that wasn't based on fairy tales—the *A Night on Bald Mountain* sequence, for example. At that time, the mature, adult subject matter didn't click with audiences. So we stuck to those themes that had proven they had audience appeal.

"*Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* are both very healthy for the field of animation. The approach on both of them is more of story and mood than one of characterization. At Disney, while we try to have a good story, we also work on a lot of character development to carry the story along.

"*Watership Down*'s animation was adequate. There were problems with it, but they could have gotten into a trap trying to do superior animation. Their story and mood carried you along. Had they stopped for greater animation characterization it would have intruded upon the mood of the film. There really was little to distinguish between the characters. You knew one or two of the rabbits as individuals, but the others were all the same.

"*Lord of the Rings* had some stuff in it that was just great. The Black Riders were very exciting. Disney probably would have lightened the story up with a little humor and more character development. We would have made the story more complete and simpler—easier to understand. If you're not familiar with the books, it's easy to get lost in Bakshi's film.

"Both *Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* were devoid of humor, really. A little more humor probably would have helped both of them."

DON BLUTH: "Changes have to be made in the animation industry because of economics. Disney is the only place with the money to do full animation.

"Bakshi has been seeking new looks while Disney remains the same. There's something nice to be said for always singing "Happy Birthday" the same way rather than making up new tunes. Of course, there's something nice about new tunes, as well. A balance is what is needed.

"Disney has always kept to the 'rated G' type of film to simplify storytelling. Now, we're expanding into PG-type films, to bring in some of the college crowd. We're not deliberately seeking out PG-type material in preference to G-type, but if a story calls for PG material, it won't be shied away from.

"I love Bakshi's use of new techniques; but without good stories, you lose people. Graphics won't hold an audience. With *Lord of the Rings*, he's got a good story; but his handling of it is confusing and ends without a sense of fulfillment. The audience is left hanging.

"Also, I think *Lord of the Rings* runs too long. *Dumbo* runs 64 minutes, *Bambi* runs 69 minutes. *Lord of the Rings* runs over two hours. 65 to 70 minutes is about the right length for an animated feature. *Lord of the Rings* started getting tedious in spots. It could have done with some editing, especially some of the battle and preparation-for-battle sequences.

"The stories for animated films really won't change much. Human values are human values. Family, being loved, loving someone else, victories, failures, etc.:

these things will remain. Stories for films are classic, and will follow those human values."

I also spoke with Ralph Bakshi, the head of Ralph Bakshi Productions, for his ideas on the future of animation. Bakshi's credits include *Fritz the Cat*; *Coon Skin*; *Hey, Good Lookin'*; *Wizards*; and of course, *Lord of the Rings*. He's currently working on *American Pop*, an animated film giving the history of past 100 years of American music.

RALPH BAKSHI: "The future of animation could be staggering. There are just so many ways to go, so many things to do that can be done with animation that can't be done any other way.

"My use of new techniques comes from a lack of funding. We have never had the kind of money behind us on a project that Disney has. We've never had the luxury of being able to stop and go back and re-do an entire sequence because we don't like it or because we've thought of a better way to do it. We've had to think out those better ways in advance.

"We've also not had the funds to spend the time it takes to really do full animation. We've had to come up with new ways to make things work, to make things look good, to make up for that lack of time and funds.

"Adult animation is the wave of the future. Animated films can compete with live action films, if people want to see them. We just have to let people know that animated films are not for kids. Adults will and do have more acceptance for this kind of film. Our grosses have been rising on every film, until now, with *Lord of the Rings*, we've set a new record for the first domestic release of an animated film.

"Animation only has a future if it changes. It can't stay the same.

The subject matter must relate to today's college-age audiences. That's why we're doing *American Pop*. People can relate to music."

The cost of animation is rising every day. The large number of people and the equipment needed to produce a feature-length animated film makes the price almost prohibitively expensive. Ron Miller, the head of Walt Disney Studios, has stated that Disney will not make any more short films. The cost is just too high compared to the return. He feels that *The Small One* won't earn out its costs for eight years.

Personally, I find this to be a great loss, especially if it is the case throughout the animation industry. Having grown up on Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck shorts, on Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons, I would be very disappointed if shorts stopped being made.

After doing much thinking on the subject of making animation more profitable, I think I've come up with a possible solution to stay the wolf from the door. Paired featurettes, two short films released together theatrically as a feature, as was done with Disney's *Ichabod & Mr. Toad*, might more than double the return of a single feature.

Each one of the films could be approximately 40 minutes long, instead of the standard 70 minutes. The cost of producing the two 40 minute films would not be significantly more than producing one at 70 minutes. The theatrical return would be the same as for a feature, but the secondary returns would be substantially greater.

Each half could be sold to a cable television system independently of the other half, to be aired separately, thereby doubling the cable sales income.

Rather than merchandising one soundtrack album and associated related merchandise, as would be done with a single feature, there would effectively be two films to merchandise—two soundtracks, two storybooks, two of everything.

This doubling of revenues would greatly increase the financial profitability of making animated films.

I could be wrong, of course, and there could be a major hole in this theory, but I don't see what it is. If someone out there would care to enlighten me as to why this plan won't work, I'd like to hear it.

WORKS IN PROGRESS AND OTHER NEWS

The Empire Strikes Back, the sequel to *Star Wars*, began principal photography on 5 March, in Finse, Norway. On 6 March, they had their first avalanche, proving that the location they had selected to look both alien and hostile was certainly hostile. No one was hurt, though, and production concluded in Norway more or less on schedule, and moved back to the EMI-Elstree studios outside of London. Filming is scheduled to run through late June.

Added to the cast is Billy Dee Williams, playing Baron Lando Calrissian, the leader of a remote mining operation on a distant planet.

Director of photography is Peter Saschitzky, who previously photographed *Valentino*, *Lisztomania*, *All Creatures Great and Small*, *Henry VII*, and *Performance*. Paul Hirsch is returning to the project as film editor, and John Mollo is back as costume designer.

Star Trek—The Motion Picture has been announced for release on 7 December 1980. Frankly, I don't believe it. As of early March, no useable special effects were completed. What appears from all

reports to have been remarkably disorganized management occurred under Bob Abel & Associates' direction of the special effects. To see if they would explode properly, all of the Klingon Battle Cruiser models were blown up. Not just one or two of them, but all of them. This is just one example out of many.

Bob Abel & Associates are no longer part of the *Star Trek* project, having left over "creative differences." Doug Trumbull and John Dykstra have both come in to work on the effects for this trouble-laden film.

The story line for the film is very similar to that of the "The Changing" episode of "Star Trek." Going on from the plot description given last issue, the new *USS Enterprise* encounters and somehow manages to best the alien enemy which wiped out three Klingon Battle Cruisers and a Federation outpost without hardly trying. The alien turns out to be the wreckage of an old *Voyager* space probe which somehow became a conscious, intelligent, living organism with an energy field surrounding it over 80 A.U.s across. The probe is heading for Earth (which is, of course, the reason the *Enterprise* was set out to stop it) to find God, which it calls "Na-sah."

The characters in the script seem to be quite a bit different from the way they were acted in the television series. Unless there is a large difference between the way the characters are written and the way the actors portray those characters on the screen, fans of the series will be in for a major surprise.

Dino Di Laurentiis has announced plans to produce a full length *Gumby* and *Pokey* movie. Using the characters from the clay-animation television series of the late 1950s, Di Laurentiis plans to begin production later this year, probably in October or November. The production is budgeted at \$12.5 million.

CBS has completed production on a made-for-television movie called *The Wild, Wild West Revisited*. Starring Robert Conrad and Ross Martin in their old roles of secret agents James West and Artemus Gordon, the film is set ten years after the series, with Grover Cleveland as president rather than Ulysses S Grant. Paul Williams, playing the son of Miguelito Loveless (the Michael Dunn rôle on the original series), is out to conquer the world; and the United States Secret Service calls our two heroes out of retirement to deal with the dread menace brought about by the son of their old diminutive nemesis.

The script fairly well captures the flavor of the old series, which could only be described as a science-fiction-western adventure show. There are a few weak spots, notably some of the writer's attempts at humor, but the show is basically enjoyable.

An air date hasn't been set for this film as yet, but watch for it. It should be a lot of fun.

Disney's *The Black Hole* is scheduled for release on or around Christmas of this year. In the film, five people land on a half-mile long space vehicle and find another person already on board. They then face the problem of entering a black hole. The film will probably be rated PG. This is unusual for Disney Studios and reflects the studio's commitment to try to add an older element to their audience. Ron Miller, head of Walt

Disney Studios, has said that they aren't trying for a PG; but if the story calls for elements that would get it a PG rating, they won't compromise the picture for the sake of getting a G rating.

Oscar-winning composer John Barry has been signed to write the score for *The Black Hole*. His credits include *Law in the Winter*, *The Deep*, *From Russia with Love*, *Goldfinger*, *Thunderball*, *You Only Live Twice*, and *Diamonds Are Forever*. Gary Nelson is directing. The screenplay is by Jeb Rosebrook and Gerry Day, from a story by Jeb Rosebrook and Bob Barash & Richard Landau.

The release of *Meteor* has been postponed until October 1979 from its original July date. The reason for this, according to the film's publicist, is a desire to spend the extra time needed to make the special effects come out as well as possible.

Bruno Bozzetto, the Italian animator and director of *Allegro Non Troppo*, has announced plans for a new animated film that will be a compilation of several different science-fiction short stories. Still in the planning stages, Bozzetto would like to use works by some of his favorite SF authors, including Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, and Robert Sheckley.

Things have changed on the production of *Conan* since last issue. Arnold Schwarzenegger is still set for the title role, but Oliver Stone and Joe Alves are not going to be directing, nor will Stone's script be used. John Millius (*Dillinger*, *Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, *Glory*, *The Wind and The Lion*, *Big Wednesday*) has been set as director with no script yet settled on. Rick Baker may not be involved with the project after all, due to other commitments.

HELLHOLE

by David Gerrold

Illustrated by Fabian

When the phenomenon reached the crest of the third hill, Ari Bh Arobi began to be annoyed. Whatever it was, it was keeping her from her ship—and she, an Imperial Griff-Princess!

The island was only six kilometers long. If the phenomenon continued to move before the wind at this rate, within an hour it would sweep the entire island—and Ari Bh Arobi with it. She chafed at the thought; it was unfitting for a Daughter of the Matriarchy to be in such a situation. Idly, she wondered how much heat her chillsuit could take before its refrigeration units broke down. Not much. Probably the phenomenon could overload it in a few seconds.

She stood atop a sandy ridge, holding her white helmet with its crimson Imperial crest in one gauntleted claw. A hot G-type star burned yellow-white in an ever-blue sky. It reflected brightly off a sea like wrinkled cellophane. It was an ugly alien panorama; the sight of so much ice in its liquid form bothered her—the psychological suggestion of so much heat made her sweat despite the fact that her chillsuit registered a comfortable -4°C .

Only stray wisps of cloud marred the blueness of that incredible dome of sky—and that was another thing, there was no roof to this world! Ari was used to a comforting close cover of gray. From childhood, the familiar and ever-present snow clouds had been constant companions and she missed them. The emptiness of this planet's hot sky was disturbing.

Also there was the appalling plume of black smoke rising from the rearing yellow phenomenon below.



It was some kind of a heat-producing phenomenon, that much she was sure of. It flickered in many yellow-orange tongues. From her vantage point above, Ari could still see her scout ship; its hull was blackened, its proud Imperial colors were almost totally obscured, but it seemed otherwise undamaged. (Well, it should be able to resist extremes of heat.) She could see it, but she couldn't reach it—that was prevented by the creeping phenomenon that bisected the island.

She wasn't ready to panic though. A Daughter of

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the Matriarchy doesn't panic. Instead, she tried to analyze the problem. She was alone on a small island, a narrow crescent of land in the middle of a molten ocean on an alien planet. Some kind of ravaging and heat-producing phenomenon was keeping her from her only means of escape; it moved before the wind and was reducing the land area left to her with every passing moment. The nearest other ship was more than a thousand kilometers out in space.

A brown rodent-like creature came hopping past her, followed by two others. One seemed to be badly "blackened"—a reaction to the phenomenon? Had it been touched? Probably. The plant life had curled and blackened under the influence of the orange flickerings.

The creature stumbled into her and fell to the ground twitching. Guilt twanged at Ari, as if somehow she were responsible for the animal's condition. Reflexively, she said a prayer for its soul. She turned her attention back to the growing tower of smoke, trying to figure out how she could prevent her own death. Undoubtedly, the phenomenon was not going to cease of its own accord—it would sweep the island.

Right now, it appeared to be consuming the island's vegetation. It glowed its brightest where the vegetation was the thickest. Obviously, the condition was dependent upon the existence of these brittle brown plants. Could it be a function of the plants somehow? Virulent spores perhaps? No, it didn't seem likely. It had to be something else.

Had the island any kind of a bare area, it would have been a simple matter for her to walk down to it and outflank the crackling phenomenon; but this yellow scrub grass and these black scraggly bushes which the condition consumed so fiercely grew right down to the water's edge, and even a little beyond that.

Patches of oily vegetation could be seen floating on the ocean's surface, apparently anchored by long rootlike tendrils. She wondered how anything could grow in water that hot—why it must be at least 20°C!

She flicked her radio on again, held the helmet close to her hooded muzzle, "Mother Bear, Mother Bear, this is She-Cub One. The phenomenon has topped hill three. Now what?"

A pause. Static crackled out of the speaker. Idly, she swung it back and forth in her hand—*World-Mother! These things are heavy!*

"She-Cub One," crackled the radio. The voice was deep and feminine. "We are aware of your difficulties. We'll have a ship down to you as soon as possible."

"How soon can they get here?"

"Uh-estimated time of arrival is one hour, thirty-three minutes."

Ari made an impatient frown. "That's not going to help."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to run out of island in about forty-five minutes. Maybe less."

"Are you sure?"

Ari growled an obscenity. "You question me?!"

"Sorry—" breathed the speaker. "Just routine double-checking."

"Oh, that's right," Ari said acidly. "I forgot—even on an Imperial ship, we have to do things by the rules."

There was silence from the communicator.

Ari exhaled loudly and said, "The phenomenon seems to be moving before the wind. When I landed, the wind was blowing about fifteen kilometers per hour, east by northeast."

"That's no wind—that's hardly a breeze."

"It's enough," snapped Ari. "That *thing* is moving in my direction and getting closer all the time."

"You can't get to your ship?"

"I can't even see it any more—the smoke's too thick. I'm being driven farther and farther away from it."

"Smoke?" asked the radio abruptly. "Is there smoke there?"

"From the phenomenon."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I did—"

"You didn't—"

"I distinctly remember—!"

"I'll play back the tape—!"

Ari was silent. *Down these scientific castes anyway! Always trying to refute a Daughter with facts! On Ura, they wouldn't be so presumptuous—not to a member of the Imperial family! That's what we get for creating a new class of upstart cubs!* She growled deep in her throat. *Next they'll be asking for equal breeding rights. We should never have allowed space travel out of the hands of the Imperial classes!*

She hefted her helmet thoughtfully; that ill-begotten daughter was still waiting patiently for Ari's reply. And nothing short of a "proper scientific answer" would suit her. Ari allowed herself a growl, then said quietly, "The phenomenon is producing smoke. Black smoke. The phenomenon itself is a nervous yellow and orange flickering, but its general progress seems slow—about a walking pace. It seems to be consuming the vegetation. It leaves the ground hot and black and covered with ash. The smoke is black at the base, but it turns brown as it spreads out in the air; there's a huge pillar of it—it covers half the sky now. I'd guess that the thing is some kind of combustion, but the scale of it is ridiculous, so it has to be something else. It's completely divides the island." She added dryly, "End of report."

"Is that all?" The voice was cold.

"Yes—" She bit off the rest of her reply before the words escaped. Later perhaps.

"Well, look," rumbled the voice of the radio operator; her sudden change of tone startled Ari. "Don't worry. There must be some way to—" A pause. When the other's voice returned, she said, "What about the water? Does the phenomenon cover that too?"

"No. It only exists where there's plant life for it to feed upon."

"Listen, would it be possible for you to swim in that water?"

Ari decided to ignore the familiarity implied in the other's tone; there would be time enough to rebuke her later. If there was a later. She looked at the still blue plane of the ocean. "I doubt it. I'd short out my chillsuit." She pulled at the white hood that covered most of her cone-shaped skull. She felt as if she were peering into an endless oven.

"We were thinking of that," said the speaker. "You'd have to take off the suit. It'd be too heavy anyway."

"Oh, no," Ari protested. "Do you know how hot that water is?"

"Twenty-one degrees," answered the radio.

"That's what I mean. It's way too hot."

"You could stand it if you had to. It'd only be for a short period of time."

"And after that? It takes twenty minutes to get in or out of a chillsuit. It takes another fifteen to charge up the ship's refrigeration units. By that time, I'd be dead from over-exposure to this planet's heat. The air temperature here is almost forty degrees. I know some science too!"

Abruptly, she was aware of a new smell in the air, like overheated—no, burned—flesh. Her nostrils quivered wetly. Some of the animals must have gotten trapped by the phenomenon, one more indication that it was a combustion of some kind.

But a combustion? Of this size?

Was an uncontrolled conflagration of such scope possible? She didn't know—and neither did those damnable scientists in the ship! The only other combustions Ari could remember had been laboratory demonstrations. She knew they used combustions in manufacturing and industrial plants, but she had never seen those; it would not have been seemly for a daughter to visit those kinds of places.

Reflexively she touched the muzzle that cooled the air she inhaled. Her chillsuit was white and coated with a layer of microscopic beads to reflect back most of the glare of the sun; it was lined with conduits that led to the life-support cluster on her back and surrounded her with an envelope of cooler air. She wore dark goggles to protect her eyes and a breathing mask over her nose and mouth. Between the

inconvenience, and all the heat and weight, she would probably sweat away five kilos of her carefully fattened bulk. *Mam-Captain* would begrudge the extra rations she would need to gain it back.

Swinging her helmet through the strange dry grass before her, Ari moved down the slope away from the phenomenon. The vegetation crunched under her wide-booted paws. She was not used to seeing plants dead and dry from lack of moisture.

Nor was she used to seeing so many plants so close together. On her home world, if there were fifty bushes like this to an acre, it would be a forest. Indeed, a jungle. She snorted in her mask—this planet would not be valuable to Urs until this Water Age came to an end and the ice-packs could reclaim the seas.

"Ari?" asked her helmet. The tone was respectful.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to go in the water?"

"I'm going to take a look," Ari said, still not admitting anything. "The vegetation grows out over it for at least six to eight meters. I'd have to do more swimming than you think."

She stood on the shore, considering the soupy mass distastefully. The land just seemed to fade away, becoming more and more swampy, until finally the yellow grass petered out in a soggy fringe.

One of the rodent-like creatures half its fur burned away, and maddened with fear and pain, came bounding past her. It was headed straight for the sea and moved with quick, jerky leaps. Abruptly, it realized where it was heading and tried to halt, tried to turn around—but something in the water went snap!

—and the creature was gone. Only an uneasy bubbling of the surface marked where it had been. Involuntarily, Ari took a step back. Then another. "Uh, Semm?"

"Yes?" Semm seemed surprised at Ari's use of her name.

"I don't think the water is such a good idea. Remember those things we found in the northern hemisphere?"

"Yes?"

"Well, they're here in the southern hemisphere too."

Semm was silent. Above, the sun burned impas-sively, a hole of brightness in the empty blue roof of the world.

"Ari?" asked Semm after a bit.

"Yes?"

"Did you say that the phenomenon is consuming the vegetation?"

"It looks like it. After it moves on, it leaves only blackened ground and what looks from here like ash."

"Then that pretty well settles it."

"Settles what?"

"The nature of the beast. Uva says it's an uncontrolled combustion."

"Huh? On this scale? I thought of that already—it can't be."

"It's got to be, Ari! Think about it—it consumes fuel, the plants; and it releases energy, the heat. What else could it be?"

"I don't know—but still . . . combustion?!! This phenomenon is uncontrolled! It can't be a combustion—who could have started it?!!"

"Look, let's assume that that's what it is and fight it on those terms. It has the same physical properties."

"And what if you're wrong? You're playing with the life of an Heir to the Matriarch!"

"Don't you think we're aware of it—the way you keep reminding us! Our lives are just as important to us as yours—" Semm relaxed her tone. "You're not making it very easy for us."

Ari said, "Do you have an idea?"

"We might. Uva says to break the combustion cycle."

"The what?"

"The combustion cycle—it's a laboratory term—"

Ari made a sound of annoyance. "Science again!"

Semm ignored it. She said patiently, "The three elements of the combustion cycle are heat, fuel, and oxygen. If you deprive a combustion of one of these three elements, it can't continue."

"Hm." Ari surveyed the island for a moment, then spoke again. "All right. How? The air temperature in this oven is forty degrees. And there's plenty of free oxygen in the air. And the island is covered with grass."

"You're right," replied the radio. "You can't do anything about the heat or the oxygen. But you can do something about the fuel. Clear an area wide enough that the combustion can't cross."

"You mean dig up the plants?" Like a common laborer? *Like a male?*"

"Yes, that's exactly what we mean."

"Do you know who I am? I am the eldest daughter of the Clan of Urs. I do not dig up plants with my hands. Males dig up plants—not Daughters of Urs."

Semm said slowly, "Scientists dig up plants too."

"Then let them come here and dig! Daughters of Urs do not!"

Still-controlled, Semm said, "You are here on this expedition as a scientist."

"I am a Daughter of Urs!" growled Ari through clenched teeth. "I do not dig!"

"You will if you want to live."

"I will not—I would sooner die than disgrace my heritage."

"You just may have to!"

"Then I will do it with honor!"

"Just a minute," said Semm. The radio went silent.

Ari stood silently on the slope and stared at the phenomenon—she still couldn't bring herself to think of it as a combustion. And yet, the heat from it was oppressive.

She moved down the island, away from the yellow-red beast and its mane of black smoke.

"Ari!" snapped the radio. It was the *Mama-Captain*.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Now you listen to me—and listen good! You're going to get down on your hands and knees and clear away some of that vegetation—enough so that the combustion can't cross."

"No," snapped Ari. "I—I will not disgrace my Mother."

"You will if you know what's good for you!" The *Mama-Captain* was angry.

"The Heir to Urs will not!"

"The Heir to Urs will! You attached yourself to this expedition thinking it would be a lark. Well, it isn't! It's a lot of hard work and danger!"

"How would I know that? You've been keeping me cooped up on the ship!"

"Exactly because you didn't know—and you refused to learn! Dammit! You foolish young bitches of the aristocracy think that space travel is just a toy! When are you going to learn that it's for the scientific advancement of the whole race! Every time one of you bitches buys her way aboard a ship, you're taking the place of a woman of honor who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty if need be, because the knowledge is more important than dying with honor!"

Ari felt the heat-rage coming over her. "Mama-Captain! When I return to Urs, I will have you broken for that!"

"You'll have to get back to Urs first."

"I will die with honor then. Your suggestion is unacceptable. I am not a male."

"You might as well be when I get through with you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if you refuse to save yourself—and that very expensive scoutship—I will enter into the log that you committed the *Nin-Gresor*."

Ari was aghast. "You wouldn't. They wouldn't believe you! The Heirs to Urs do not commit the coward's death."

"They will believe what I tell them—and we will tell them that you killed yourself. That is what your refusal to dig amounts to. We will tell them that your presence aboard the ship endangered the lives of all of us and eventually your stupidity killed you—it will not be so far from the truth. Perhaps it will keep the aristocracy away from spaceships in the future."

"They will kill you for that!"

"They will kill me anyway for returning without you. Our lives are bound together, Ari. If you refuse to save yourself, I'll disgrace your name."

"You couldn't do such a thing—" Ari could not conceive of anyone being so—evil.

"You'd better believe I would," the *Mom-Captain* rambled back. "You'd better start saving yourself, noble Daughter of Urs. There is no one else there to do it for you."

Ari grumbled at the helmet, she hissed at it. She circled it angrily. Finally, she said, "All right. What do I do?"

Semm's voice answered, "Dig, Ari, dig. Clear an area as wide as you can as long as you can. Don't leave any plants at all growing."

"It is harder work than an Heir to Urs should have to do."

"Do it anyway. It won't kill you."

"So you say," she grumbled. She picked up her helmet and began striding eastward again, ahead of the combustion phenomenon, looking for a more suitable area to clear a break. Finally, she found a wide area, covered only with the dry, waist-high grass.

She bent to the ground and began pulling at the grass, but the stalks crumbled in her hands. And the gloves she wore didn't aid her dexterity any; she couldn't get a grip.

In a few moments she realized it wouldn't work. The roots of the plants were too firmly anchored and the stalks were too dry. *How does anything grow in this hellhole anyway?* If all the grass was like this, the whole island would be a natural combustion chamber. She said a word.

"Something the matter?" the radio asked.

"I'll say. I can't pull any of these damn plants up."

"All you need is maybe ten or fifteen yards of clear area."

"I don't know about that—I think it could leap the gap." Holding her breath, she pulled her mask off her muzzle and wiped the sweat off her nose. It didn't help.

"Try digging them up."

"With what?" She tried scooping at the ground with the edge of her helmet—

"What in the name of *World-Mother* is that?" cried Semm.

"Just my helmet. I was trying to see if I could dig with it. I can't."

"You aren't wearing it?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it's heavy—and it burns my ears."

"Ari!" The other was exasperated. "You were given specific orders—"

"Hang the orders! It burns. And I'm not—any

danger. We've been here two months. This is my first time on the ground and I want to breathe some real air."

"Ari," despaired the other. "You're going to be disciplined for that."

"How?" taunted Ari. "You've got to save me first."

"You've got to save yourself!" growled a different voice, the *Mom-Captain* again. Apparently, she had been listening at the radio. "We have no way of getting to you, Ari—at least not before the combustion sweeps the island."

"Fine—then I'll save myself my way! And if that means leaving my helmet off, then that's the way I'll do it. You should have known about this combustion phenomenon."

"There are a lot of things I should have known about," sighed the other. "Unfortunately, I am not as wise as an Heir to Urs. That's why we have rules on how to explore unknown planets. I will only be able to tell the Matriarch the truth—that you refused to follow her rules."

Enraged and swearing, Ari flung the helmet away. Then, realizing that she couldn't answer the *Mom* without it, she retrieved it. "This is all a waste of time," she announced. "There's no point in standing here arguing."

"I agree," said the *Mom-Captain*. "Have you tried shoveling into the earth with your hands?"

Ari dropped the helmet in disgust and kicked it away.

But she got down on her knees and began working. It was true—she didn't want to die. At least they couldn't see her working like this. Her great shovel-shaped claws scooped at the dirt. If she grabbed the plant low enough, just where the root system began, she could pull it up enough to dig under it and weaken it and then perhaps she could pull it up some more and . . .

Shortly, she was able to clear a small area in front of herself, perhaps two or three feet square. She paused, looked up, wiped at her muzzle again, and suddenly realized how close the flames were. She grabbed her helmet and jumped to her feet. "Perdition!"

"What's the matter?" asked the helmet.

"It's no good. The brush is too thick. The island is too wide. I could never clear a big enough area in time."

Semm didn't answer.

Ari could feel the frustration welling up inside of her. "Dammit, Semm—the *Mom-Captain* ordered—no, threatened me. I tried your stupid idea—I disgraced myself! If I get out of this, I'll never live it down—but it didn't work. I can't dig them up fast enough."

Semm remained respectfully silent. Ari was almost in tears; frustration and anger were choking

her. She kept backing away from the combustion. Then, for no reason, she broke into a run, loping eastward for several hundred meters. She had to weave her course around the craggly bushes. This incredible heat-world!

She stopped, panting easily, and glanced backward. It should take the phenomenon awhile to close this distance.

"Ari, the rescue ship is in the atmosphere now."

"Fine. They'll arrive just in time to consecrate my body."

"Don't talk like that. You sound like a *Nin-Greese*. Besides, you've still got more than half an hour to go."

Ari checked her chronometer. "Not much more than that." She sat down on a rocky outcrop, watched as the crackling orange *thing* lapped at the base of the fourth (or was it the fifth?) hillock. Was that where her abortive attempt at clearing the grass had been?

No matter. She tossed the thought away. She tried to brush the dirt from her gloves. Pah! Digging!

"How are you fixed for oxygen?"

"Why?"

"Nivis's got an idea. There's another way to break the combustion cycle."

"Huh? How?"

"Oxygen."

"What? I already told you there's no way to cut off its oxy supply—"

"No, you don't cut it off. You overload it. You feed it oxygen. Pure oxygen."

"You're out of your—"

"The computer says it'll work. If you feed enough pure oxygen into the combustion, you'll create a superheated area. It'll need more and more oxygen to survive and will start sucking it in from the surrounding area. It'll be like a storm—a combustion storm!"

"That's all I need—more combustion phenomena."

"No, no! Listen—after it's used up all the oxygen in its immediate vicinity, it'll have to pull in more and more from the surrounding area in order to keep burning—that'll change the local wind pattern. The combustion on the edges of the phenomenon will cease from lack of oxygen and you could get around it and back to your ship. Now, listen—feed your oxygen to the base of the phenomenon—"

"Semm," Ari interrupted. "It sounds awfully risky. And it's pretty hot here already."

"Ari, it may be your only chance."

"You said that about digging up the plants."

"All right, we were wrong."

"I can still think of two reasons why I can't do it." Ari felt her eyes watering from the smoke despite her goggles and chillsuit. "First, I don't think this

island is big enough for that storm effect you talk about."

"We don't know until you try."

"I'm here on the scene, Semm—it doesn't feel practical. Besides . . ." she hesitated, embarrassed, ". . . all my extra oxy tanks are still in the ship."

A pause. Then, "Why the hell aren't you wearing them?"

"Because I don't need them—and they're heavy, dammit! Gravity here is eleven percent higher than home!" She stopped, forced herself to be calm. "Besides, I don't think I could get close enough to the phenomenon anyway." She wiped the sweat from her muzzle again. "That thing is awfully hot." She peered at a dial on her belt pack. "From here it reads several hundred degrees at its core—this thing must be broken."

Another pause from the radio, a crackle of static.

"If only you could change the wind or something . . ."

She didn't answer. Semm was right, though. The wind was the whole problem. If only it had been blowing in some other direction. If only, if only . . .

"Ari? You still there?"

"Where would I go?" she muttered.

"Nowhere. Just checking," the radio said.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. Uh, just keep talking, will you?"

"Why?"

"Just keep talking, huh? So we know everything is all right. Tell us how the phenomenon started."

"I did that already."

"Tell us again. You might have left something out."

Ari stared out over the ocean for a long moment, wondering whether or not it was worth the trouble to be obstinate.

"If you don't start talking, Mam-Captain says you'll scrub decks for a month."

"She'll have to come and get me." But despite herself, Ari smiled.

"Better talk, Ari. You might survive."

"All right . . . I brought the ship down on a little spit of land on the western edge of the island—I should have made a pontoon landing. That's what I should have done. But I wanted to show off my piloting skill and put down on the land instead. Before I'd gotten fifteen meters away from the ship, I heard a noise. Or maybe not. Anyway, something made me turn around. At first, I thought the ship was exploding. Then I realized it was the vegetation—Semm!" she said suddenly. "That's how it started!"

"Huh?"

"The combustion! It started from the heat of the scoutship! The skin of it was still hot from my landing! Isn't it obvious? The vegetation is the fuel and

there's plenty of free oxygen in the air—all that was needed to start the combustion was heat and I supplied that when I touched down!"

"Um," said Semm. "You're probably right. We'll have to add a note to all future landing procedures."

"World-Mother!" said Ari. "What an unstable ecology this must be!"

"Oh, there must be some kind of adaptive mechanisms, for reseeding and such."

"Semm, you should see this! Nothing could survive!"

The helmet said, "Ari?"

In a quieter voice: "I'm still here."

"The wind? Is there any chance it might let up? Or maybe shift direction?"

Ari sniffed the air thoughtfully. "I can't tell with this muzzle on—and I'm not going to risk taking it off. Anyway, I doubt it. It seems pretty steady."

"Oh. All right. It was only a thought."

"If anything, it seems to be picking up."

"Mm."

"That ship can't get here any faster?"

"Sorry."

"It's all right," Ari said. She grinned wryly. "Just don't let it happen again."

"We'll try not to."

"Semm?" Ari said.

"Yes?"

"Put the Mom-Captain on, will you?"

"Huh? What for?"

"Just do it. I want to make out my will."

"All right." There was a pause from the helmet. After a moment, a new voice rumbled out of the speaker, the Mom-Captain's. "All right, Ari," she said. "I'm recording. Go on."

Ari cleared her throat, a deep raspy growl. "I, Ari Bb Arohi, Heir to Urs, being of sound mind and healthy body and so on, hereby leave, bequeath and so on, all my worldly belongings to . . ." She paused.

"Go on," the radio urged.

Ari cleared her throat and began again: "I leave all my worldly goods, to be divided equally among all other Heirs to Urs. I hereby grant freedom to all twenty of my personal male slaves, including my brood-husbands. I return all of my titles and nobilities to the body of the World-Mother. Uh, and any personal possessions on the ship that any of my shipmates want, well—the Mom-Captain has my authority to dispose of them as she sees fit." She trailed off. "Oh, one more thing—I hereby absolve all other members of this expedition, including the Mom-Captain, of any responsibility for any actions which may have directly or indirectly resulted in my death. They may not be held liable to any claims made either in my name or against my name; at all times, their actions and their concerns have been for the welfare of the aristocracy. As an Heir to Urs, I ac-

cept full weight of the burden myself and respectfully petition the Matriarchy not to take any reprisals of any kind against any of the members of this expedition. As an Heir to Urs, I claim the right of responsibility; the fault is my own, let the death be my own as well. That's all. I'm through."

The Mom-Captain rumbled, "It's a fine will, child." Her voice sounded strange.

"Did you get it all?"

A pause. Then, Semm's voice: "Yes, we got it." Another pause. "Uva wants to know if she can have your melt-cup."

Tell her to go ahead. And the frozen incense too."

"She says thanks."

"Tell her she's welcome. I'll let her do the same for me someday."

"Sure," said Semm. Another pause. "Keep talking, huh?"

"Uh uh," said Ari. "Throat's getting dry. World-Mother, this thing is heavy!"

"What is?"

"This helmet." She found herself looking at it, at the shrinking spot of land left to her, at the helmet again. "What the hell am I dragging it around for?" She dropped it to the ground.

"Ari!" cried the speaker. "Mom-Captain says you keep that helmet with you!" But it was too late. Ari was already walking away from it.

She had maybe fifteen minutes left, and couldn't decide. The flames or the water?

Of course, she knew what was going to happen. Like the rodent-creatures, she would keep retreating from the ever-advancing flames until she was backed into the water. And then, she'd keep swimming for as long as she could, until she could either swim to safety; or more likely, until—

She preferred not to think about the other possibility. Idly she tapped at a bush. The branch was dry and snapped off in her hand. Still holding it, she started walking along the flame front, as close to it as she dared.

On impulse, she held the branch into a tendril of curling flame. The wood smoldered, charred, then puffed afire.

Stepping back with it, she watched as the flame curled up along the dry limb. It was hard to believe that this was the same phenomenon as that roaring holocaust. She turned the branch upside down. The fire continued to move from burnt to unburnt. "Won't change direction, will you?" she said to it. "Once you've burned something, you're through with it. Never satisfied though. Always looking for something else . . . I used to have a pup like that; she didn't stop eating till the last dish was empty and she didn't believe it was empty till she'd checked it herself."

Ari started to throw the branch away, then hesitated. She turned and looked at the fire again, frowning—

○

When the rescue team arrived, Ari Bh Arobi, the Heir to Urs, was sitting on a rocky outcrop next to her ship. She stood as they approached. Her grin could be seen even through the breathing mask of her chillsuit. "What took you so long?"

"Huh?" They scrambled across the black-crusted ground. "You're supposed to be dead!"

Ari was still grinning. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"What did you—Oh, it must have been the water. You swam around, didn't you."

Ari shook her head. "Uh uh. I told you, there's things in that ocean."

"Then, bow—"

Ari was enjoying their frustration. "Well, it's like this. I'm an Heir to Urs, so I simply applied my superior intellectual abilities and—"

"Wait a minute." One of the two she-bears was fiddling with her radio. "Maw! She's alive!—Yes! Yes! *Unkurt!*—No, Maw! Not a burn, not a scratch—I don't know. We're finding out now." She looked at Ari. "Go on."

Ari shrugged. "It was simple. The combustion phenomenon was sweeping across the island at a steady rate, right? I had to keep moving downwind to avoid it. The problem wouldn't have existed if I was behind the thing. It could sweep all the way down to the end of the island and it wouldn't bother me at all."

"Well, that was the whole idea, to get you through the combustion. Or around it."

"No, stupid—the problem was not to get me through the combustion. The problem was to get it downwind."

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"Not at all," said Ari. "Not at all."

"All right—how did you get the combustion downwind."

"Simple. I put it there."

"Huh?"

"I took a stick. I held it in the flame until it caught. Then I walked downwind and started a second combustion. The wind blew this one toward the east too, right up to the end of the island—and I was safely behind it. Although those things in the water sure caught a lot of rodents there for a while."

"Wait a minute—" The pilot was frowning. "That would have put you between two flame-walls."

"Only for a short time. Both were moving eastward at the same rate. It was easy enough to keep between them. When the first combustion reached the ground where the second one had been started, it went out. Lack of fuel. Simple. After the ground cooled enough, I walked back to my ship."

"Well, I'll be damned—"

"Probably," agreed Ari. "See, everybody on the ship was worrying about the combustion cycle and things like that. It took an on-the-scene observer to interpret the behavior of the phenomenon and to use its own characteristics against itself—"

"Oh, Mother—" breathed the pilot. "She's going to be impossible."

"Hey," called the other. "Uva wants to know, does this mean you're taking back your melt-cup?"

"Absolutely." Ari grinned. "And the incense too."

"Wait a minute, Ari. *Mam-Captain* wants to talk to you."

"Uh huh," Ari said, reaching for the radio. "Probably wants to congratulate me—"

"Uh uh—she's madder'n hell," whispered the other. "Something about discipline and a burned space helmet—"

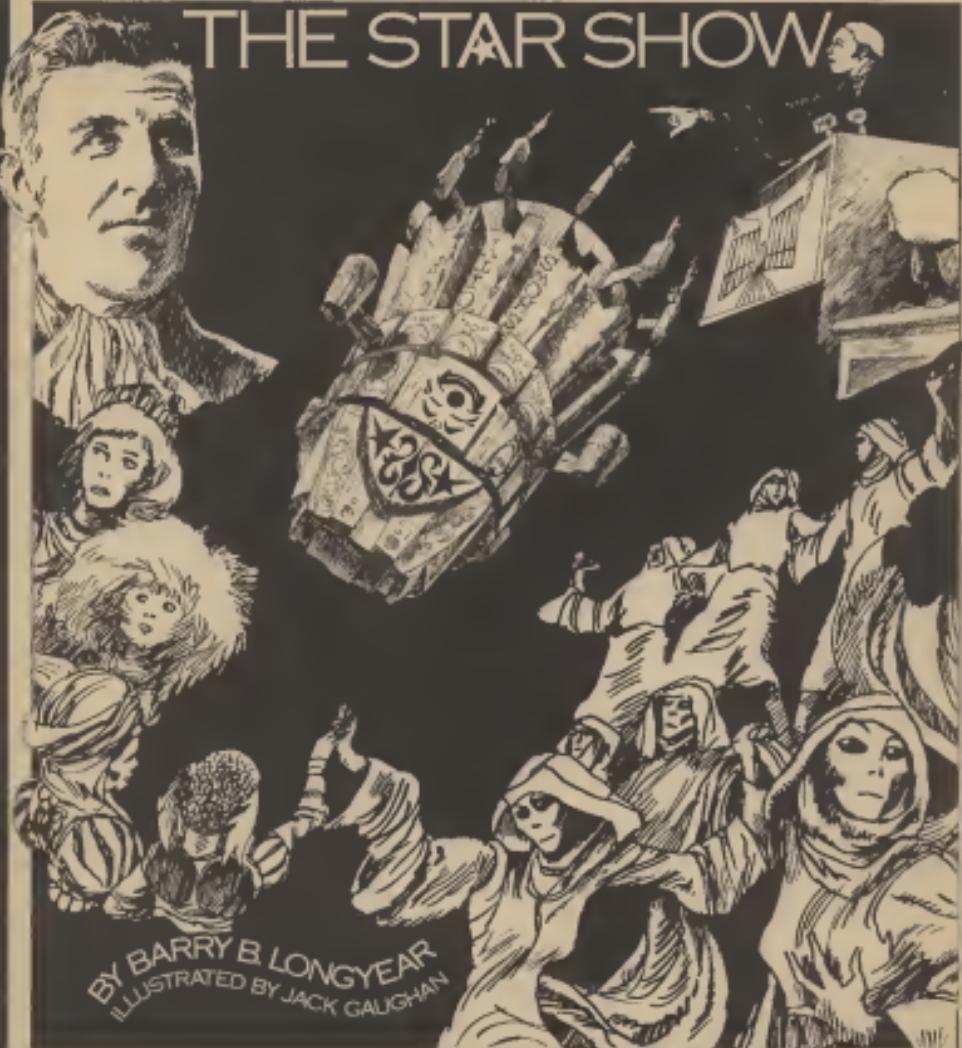
Ari suddenly remembered she had absolved the *Mam-Captain* of all responsibility. She couldn't pull rank on her anymore—

Ari Bh Arobi, Heir to Urs, was about to get her first spanking.



JOHN J. O'HARA'S LAST SHOW ON EARTH
★ COMBINED WITH FOLLOW THE RED WAGONS ★

THE STAR SHOW



BY BARRY B. LONGYEAR
ILLUSTRATED BY JACK GAUGHAN

It was the age of the commonplace miracle. Memory was worn on the wrist, and a balance between man and man, and man and nature had been achieved and was maintained by an effective, if complex, body of laws and enforcement agencies. Cancers had gone the way of smallpox and plague, while cosmetic surgical alterations had become as usual as changing one's shirt or socks. The resolution of human problems was taken for granted, the remaining human mental task being the formulation of goals. The union of man-nature-technology-government could do anything on Earth—anything, except keep alive the Governor's idea of a circus.

The Greatest Show On Earth, a poor three-poled affair transported by twenty-five vans, was also the last show on Earth. There were still the old problems: fire, windstorms, mud, accidents, shakedowns, sick animals, breakdowns. And, there were newer ones; the age of the commonplace miracle had left no room for a circus. Room, especially the kind needed by a circus, was too valuable. The show paid seven hundred credits per kilometer in tolls; the flat, hard, grayish lots near population centers—such lots as remained—cost the show upwards of thirty-thousand credits for the twenty-four hours it would occupy the site to put on five hours' worth of entertainment. And, there were departments upon departments, each with its fee and its own paper nightmare, and now, new laws.

The Patch had uttered the words almost as though it seared his throat to do so. "Mr. John, I just can't move them." He had begun to add something more, but stopped and left the office wagon.

Hours later, midway through the evening show, the Governor sat in the dark of the office wagon, listening to the windjammers slapping out the notes from the main tent. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair. Nothing sounds like a circus band. Skilled orchestras of gillie musicians can make a try, but to the ear that had been reared with the windjammers, nothing else sounded even close. Musicians strapped into rigid notes, quarters, halves, and rests cannot imitate the sound and beat of those trained to play to the swing of a dancing horse or elephant to make it look as though the animals were dancing to the music rather than the other way around. The Governor let out a sigh. The Patch had been hit pretty hard.

He opened his eyes and watched the reflection of the main entrance lights through the wagon's pay window on the wall. That writer had asked why. The work was hard, the dangers many, the difficulties almost insurmountable, and the money return small to non-existent. The fellow had really been puzzled. Why? Why, when there are so many other, profitable areas of the entertainment industry. Why a circus? The Governor had given the writer the stock trouper's answer: "It's a disease."

The Governor leaned forward, placed his hands

over his face, and his elbows on his desk. It's worse than a disease; it's a clawing need, an addiction, an a priori must that no rube with a typewriter could ever understand, and so you tell writers, reporters, TV journalists the same thing that circus people have been telling civilians for decades: "It's a disease." Why is a question that a trouper never asks. Question asking is a head game, and a trouper's head has no ready answer for why. But, under the paint, the sweat, the scars, the pain, deep within that thing called a soul, the trouper has to—that's all. It's a given.

The Governor lowered his hands and shook his head. "Perhaps we should ask why," he said to the empty interior of the wagon. He stood, walked slowly around his desk, then to the door of the wagon. He pushed open the door and looked out onto the lot. The Patch had come back to the wagon after the first show.

"I have one last thing to try, Mr. John. It has to work. It just has to."

The Governor had looked into his old fixer's eyes and nodded. The man had been the legal adjuster for O'Hara's Greater Shows when the Governor's father had been Governor. "Maybe we're all past our prime," he said, then walked down the steps to the lot. He paused in the dark, recognized the waltz that would cue the flyers, then walked on. The circus had forty-six minutes of life remaining. As he approached the animal top, it jarred him to see it still standing. On a normal night it would have been torn down, unlashed, and loaded an hour before. And, on a normal night, the canvas gang would be preparing to clear out and tear down the main top hot on the heels of the last departing customer. But this was no normal night. As O'Hara approached a group of roughnecks, one of them stood. "Evening, Governor."

O'Hara stopped. "Goofy Joe."

"Any word yet, Governor?"

O'Hara shook his head. "Looks like we're in the cart for good this time. Those environmental officers'll confiscate the animals and run us all in if we cross the district line."

Goofy Joe removed his soft brim hat, threw it on the lot, and jammed his hands into his trouser pockets. "Can't The Patch fix it?"

O'Hara shrugged. The show's fixer had pulled the company out of a thousand legal mires in his time, but this one had The Patch stamped. "Doesn't look like it. Not this time. Seen the Boss Canvasman?"

Goofy Joe stooped over, picked up his hat, then

stood. He cocked his head toward the entrance to the menagerie. "You know Duckfoot. He'll be in there with the bulls." The roughneck threw his hat on the lot again. "Why'd we ever have to come here?"

O'Hara placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "We're in the right place, Joe; it's past that we're about a hundred years too late." He withdrew his hand, turned, and walked through the dark to the animal-top entrance. In the dim light of service lamps at the ends of the tent, he could see the eight elephants calmly pulling trunkfuls of hay from bales, and munching. As she recognized him, Lolita stuck out her ears, lifted her massive head, then lowered it again as she pretended not to see him. He entered the tent, nodded at the Boss Canvasman and Boss Animal Man seated in the center of the tent on overturned buckets, then stopped with his back to Lolita. In seconds O'Hara felt Lolita's trunk slip into his coat pocket, grab the bag of peanuts he kept there, and sneak it out.

He turned and looked at the elephant. "What was that?" Lolita shifted her weight from one foot to the other and shook her head. O'Hara reached into his coat pocket and frowned. "I could swear that I had peanuts in here." He glowered at the elephant. Lolita shook her head again, and as O'Hara turned his back and left, she swept the straw in front of her with her trunk, picked up the bag of peanuts, and stuffed the entire thing in her mouth.

Duckfoot chuckled as he stood. "Lolita's gettin' to be a real dip, Governor. Careful she doesn't go after your leather."

O'Hara grinned and shrugged. "For the money that's in it, she can have it." He nodded at the Boss Animal Man. "Everything quiet, Pony?"

Pony Red Milne nodded. "They were a little excited that they weren't being loaded on time, Mr. John, but they're settled down now."

O'Hara nodded, kicked over a bucket with his foot, then sat on it. Duckfoot and Pony Red resumed their seats. "Duckfoot, the city wants us off the lot by tomorrow, so don't let the canvas gang go until after. One way or the other we'll need them to tear down the show."

Duckfoot shook his head. "Where're those roughnecks going to go, Mr. John? It's not like they can hook up with another show. We're it: the last show on Earth. What's going to happen to them?"

O'Hara shook his head, pursed his lips, then shook his head again. "I just don't know."

Pony Red held out a hand indicating the elephants and the line of cage wagons filled with tigers, lions,

apes, and other animals. "What about them?"

O'Hara looked into Pony Red's eyes, then averted his glance. "None of the zoos or preserves will take them. All the time I get the same reason: they're not wild anymore so putting them in a preserve would violate the environmental integrity or something." He shook his head. "Of course, we can't take them over the district line because we aren't providing environmental settings appropriate to them in their wild states."

Pony Red spat on the wood shavings that covered the ground. "So, does that mean we'll have to destroy them?"

Duckfoot scratched the back of his neck. "Guess they're about to get the Hell protected out of them." He looked at O'Hara. "I never thought The Patch would let us down."

Pony Red held out his hands. "What about that command performance? You know, on that other planet? We could at least keep the show together. Earth is no place for a circus anyway."

O'Hara shook his head. "Patch tried, but the same bunch that won't let us cross the district line say we can't take the animals off the planet, away from their natural environment." He sighed. "We're boxed in, Pony, and that's all there is to it."

All three lifted their heads as the orchestra swung into a familiar two-step. Duckfoot rubbed a knuckle into his right eye. "Damned dust!" He cocked his head toward the main tent. "The windjammers sound a little off their tunes." Lunge Ropé Willy's liberty horses would be out now doing the quadrille. Thirty-four minutes left.

The customer lights went on, illuminating the interior of the tent. Duckfoot shot to his feet. "What the Hell?" Pony Red and the Governor joined him, and the three faced the entrance as several official-looking types entered the tent. The obvious Mr. Big led the procession, followed by some lesser officials and a number of reporters. Mr. Big was holding the hand of a little girl who was staring saucer-eyed at the elephants. Immediately behind the little girl was a tall, thin man dressed in black. Duckfoot jabbed O'Hara in the ribs with his elbow and whispered, "Mr. John, it's The Patch."

As the three walked over to the procession, the little girl pulled on Mr. Big's arm. "Ossooo! Daddy,

look at the elephant! And that one, and that one—"

Mr. Big pulled his daughter along. "Yes, yes, honey. Come along now." He stopped and faced The Patch as Duckfoot, Pony, and the Governor joined them. "Now, Mr. Wellington, could you explain why you dragged me here?"

The Patch held his hand out toward O'Hara. "First, Mister Prime Minister, may I introduce John O'Hara, the owner of O'Hara's Greater Shows."

Mr. Big looked down his nose at O'Hara, issued a two-second grin, nodded his head, and said "Charmed." He turned back to The Patch. "Mr. Wellington, you said that there was something that I must make a decision on, and my attorney-general seems to agree with you. Could we get on with it?"

The Patch nodded. "Certainly. As you know, Prime Minister Frankle, where the statutes are vague and enforcement would cause severe loss to a company or individual, the injured party has the right to demand that an elected official accept responsibility for the enforcement—"

"Yes, yes. Do you have the document?" Mr. Big took the paper from The Patch's hand, scanned it, then reached into his pocket for a pen. "Everything appears to be in order."

Patch rubbed his chin. "Mister Prime Minister, you realize of course that enforcement of that order will require that we destroy our animals."

Mr. Big scanned the document again. "Yes, that seems clear. What of it?"

The Patch handed Mr. Big a photograph, then handed out more photographs to the other officials, the reporters, and to Mr. Big's daughter. "You see, Mister Prime Minister, this is how we have to destroy an elephant. We chain its back legs to a cart—that's a tractor—then run a chain around its neck through a slip ring, then hook that to another tractor. The two tractors go in opposite directions, and the animal is strangled."

Mr. Big curled up a lip, then shook his head. "Well, distasteful as it seems . . ." He lifted his pen.

"Daddy, you wouldn't!"

He glowered at The Patch, then turned to the little girl. "Honey, you must understand that the law is the law, and it's Daddy's job to enforce it."

The little girl looked at the photo of the strangling elephant, looked up at Lolita happily munching away

on a bag of peanuts she had lifted from a reporter, then back at her father. "You monster!" She pulled back a patent-leather shoe and kicked the Prime Minister in the shin, then ran crying from the tent. It was lost on no one that the reporters had snapped possibly fifty different shots of the scene.

The Patch nodded his head at Mr. Big. "If you could just sign the paper, sir, we'll be able to get on with murdering our animals."

The hand holding the paper dropped to Mr. Big's side. "Mr. Wellington, I don't mind saying that this stunt of yours is unfair. Just think what you've done to my daughter!"

The Patch shrugged. "I'm not the one who is ordering the animals murdered." He pointed at the paper. "If you would just sign—"

Another official type stepped from the back and faced Mr. Big. "Sir, don't you see what he's doing? We can't let him transport those animals over the district line. We'd be making a laughingstock out of the law."

Another official stepped from the back. "Sir, we cannot take them into the preserves. We are trying to maintain a wild state in the preserves. I mean, what would a performing elephant look like in the middle of that? I just can't have it!"

Mr. Big frowned, looked at the paper, then looked back at the first official. "What about granting a permit for transportation off planet?"

The first official shook his head. "Impossible. It would involve thrusting those animals into totally alien environments. You must see that, sir."

Mr. Big looked at the reporters, looked at the picture of the strangling elephant, rubbed his shin, then studied the document. He looked again at the reporters, then returned his glance to the official. "A thing you appear to be unable to see, sir, is that I am an elected official, while you are appointed." He looked back at the picture. "I would venture that after our friends from the fourth estate," he grinned at the reporters, "are finished with this, I will go down next to Adolf Hitler as the archfiend of the past two centuries." He shook his head. "But, still . . ."

The Patch leaned over and whispered into Mr. Big's ear. He finished, and the official looked at him, pursed his lips, then nodded. "I see, but how . . .?"

The Patch pulled a paper from his pocket and handed it to the official. Mr. Big read it, then nodded and signed it. He faced official number one. "I have just signed an authorization to transport these animals off planet."

The official's eyebrows went up. "But sir, the

law—"

Mr. Big cleared his throat, looked at The Patch, then looked back at the official. "Since, on Earth, the environment provided by these people for the animals is unacceptable, and since the animals are unacceptable to the preserves because they are circus animals, I have decided to authorize their transportation off planet. After all," he nodded at The Patch, "what environment for a circus animal is more appropriate than a circus?"

"But—"

Mr. Big held up his hand. "Be still, Beeker. I'm up for election in five months. What chance do you think I'll have if this happens?" He held out the photograph.

"Sir, there are more important things than an election!"

"To you," Mr. Big handed the paper to The Patch, then turned and exited, followed by the officials and reporters. O'Hara lifted his arm and placed it on The Patch's shoulder.

"I suppose you explained to the Minister that bulls haven't been destroyed that way for over a century."

The Patch looked at the paper in his hands, closed his eyes, then opened them as his hands began to shake. "Mr. John—"

O'Hara grabbed the fixer by his elbow while Duckfoot rushed to hold his other arm. "Patch, are you all right?"

Patch cocked his head toward the center of the tent. "Put me down on one of those buckets, Mr. John. I've been on my dogs all day...."

Duckfoot and the Governor helped the fixer to one of the overturned buckets and lowered him. The Governor looked up at the Boss Animal Man. "Get Bone Breaker in here."

Patch held up a hand. "No, Pony. All I need is a little rest." O'Hara cocked his head toward the entrance, and Pony Red rushed out to get the circus's surgeon. The Patch shook his head. "All I need is some rest. I don't think Bone Breaker has a cure for being a little over thirty, does he?"

O'Hara smiled. The Patch had been "a little over thirty" for at least thirty years. The old fixer's confidence had been shaken pretty badly, but was now on the mend. "Now that we can breathe easy for a while, you better go and lie down."

The Patch frowned, folded the off-planet authorization and placed it into his breast pocket. When his hand came out, it held another piece of paper. "We don't get to breathe easy for too long, Mr. John." He held out the paper. "All I've done is to buy a little

time. This fix is up to you."

Duckfoot sighed. "What now?"

The Governor read the telegram, then looked up at Duckfoot. "The backers, Arnhem and Boon. They're closing the show." O'Hara crumpled up the sheet, threw it on the ground and stormed from the tent. Duckfoot looked down at The Patch.

"What do you think?"

The Patch smiled. "I was worried before with the Governor moping around. I think that shook me more than anything else. But now he's mad. I'm not worried."



"You must understand, Mr. O'Hara, that Arnhem and Boon Conglomerated Enterprises cannot afford the liabilities of having a...circus among its properties." O'Hara frowned around at the sixteen indifferent faces seated around the polished onyx conference table while the accountant consulted his memory. The walls were stark white and without windows. O'Hara felt caged. The accountant looked up from his wrist. "It seems that we acquired the assets of O'Hara's Greater Shows in 2137 when we merged with Tainco, the entertainment conglomerate. Since then, O'Hara's has made a net of 56,000 credits."

O'Hara held out his hands in a gesture of vindication realized. "See?"

The accountant grimaced and continued. "That is less than half a percent return on investment. And, last year..." he again consulted his wrist, "last year O'Hara's was in the red to the tune of 187,000—"

"Point of order." One of the sixteen raised his hand and faced the head of the table. "Karl, haven't we voted on this already? I don't see the point of chewing this cabbage another time."

Karl Arneheim nodded. "Your point is well taken, Sid, but John—Mr. O'Hara—wasn't present when we discussed this. I think it's only right that we give him our reasons for skipping him from the corporate body, so to speak."

O'Hara held up a hand and waved. "Can I say my piece now?"

Arneheim nodded. "Of course you may, John, but you realize that the decision has been made."

O'Hara clasped his hands and rested them on the edge of the table. "What you're telling me is that you're just going to ax the show? You're not even going to try and sell it?"

Arneheim shook his head. "There are no buyers, at any price. And now the government has all but shut you down, what point is there in whipping a dead horse, so to speak?"

O'Hara bit his lower lip. "What if I bought it?"

A wave of chuckles and head shaking circled the table. Arneheim leaned back in his chair, rubbed his chin, then turned toward the accountant. "Milt, what will it cost us to discharge the show's liabilities and dispose of the animals and equipment?"

The accountant again consulted his wrist. "A little over a quarter of a million credits. Of course, with Mr. O'Hara's three percent interest in the show, A&BCE is only liable for ninety-seven percent of that." The accountant looked at O'Hara with a genuine expression of concern on his face. "Mr. O'Hara, you must realize that absolutely no one wants to destroy your circus, but you can't take on sole responsibility." He shrugged. "It's just not done."

O'Hara looked at Arneheim. "Well?"

Arneheim clasped his fingers and twiddled this thumbs. "What kind of a figure did you have in mind, John?"

"Even swap, A&BCE's interest in the show and I take on the liabilities."

Arneheim looked around the table. "Gentlemen?"

One of the faces nodded. "We're not going to get a better offer."

Another face nodded. "I say take it and run like a thief."

Arneheim nodded. "All in favor of accepting Mr. O'Hara's offer?" The vote was unanimous. Arneheim turned to the accountant. "Very well, Milt, see that the papers are drawn up and presented to Mr. O'Hara

within the hour." Arneheim faced the Governor, then shook his head. "Explain something for me, John."

O'Hara shrugged. "If I can."

"You've just taken on a back-breaking debt, practically exiled yourself from this planet, and committed yourself and your show to a bleak future. I can't see where you'll go after Ahngar. There just aren't that many wealthy monarchs having birthday parties to keep you going." Arneheim held out his hands. "All this for a threadbare tent show. Can you tell me why? Why are you doing it?"

O'Hara studied Karl Arneheim for a few moments as he searched for the words, but then the Governor shrugged. "It's a disease."



Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows, 12 June 2142.

Ossinid, on the planet-Ahngar. The show has arrived about three months early for Erkev IV's birthday celebration, and the Monarch's representative has informed us that the show will have to fend for itself until October. The Governor decided to finish out the season and sent out the route man, general agent, and the advance to prepare the way. Ossinid, a burg of about twenty-five thousand, is our first stand. The bulls and river horses appear to enjoy the lighter gravity, and the Boss Hustler and Boss Canvasman unloaded the show and had the main top put up in record time. Some of the spangle prunts, flyers and tumblers mostly, say that the difference in gravity is throwing them off.

Rat Man Jack, the show's route man, stood in the midway in front of The Amazing Ozamund's spoiler, while the barker looked at the willowy, robe-clad Ahngarians crowding the entrances to the various sideshows. The barker said, "Lookit 'em, Rat Man. I've sold out every show for Ozzie, and the other spikers are getting straw houses too. But they come in, sit, watch the show, get up and go out. Never saw anything like it. Not a single clap, not even an appreciative nod. They just sit like so much granite. I tell you, it's about to drive Ozzie into his cups."

Rat Man Jack nodded. "The ticket sellers at the front entrance have been out of blues for an hour, and the advance sold off the last reserved seat a week before the show arrived." He studied a few of the Ahngarians emerging from the freak show, then turned toward the spikier. "Motor Mouth, you've been looking at them all day. Do they seem just a little hostile? Like they might be planning something if the show doesn't measure up to what they expected?"

Motor Mouth shrugged, then shook his head. "No. They just don't do anything. I almost wish they'd start throwing garbage, just to get a reaction. It's spooky, that's what." Motor Mouth turned to his left and noted that The Amazing Ozamund's audience was letting out. "Well, back to the job." He lifted his bamboo cane, cocked his straw skimmer over his right eye, and proceeded with the ballyhoo. "Ladies and gentlemen, inside this tent, brought to amaze you with feats of magic at great expense, The Amazing Ozamund, who will astound you with . . ."

Rat Man stepped away from the stand, and in seconds a line of fresh customers were buying tickets to attend the magic show. Rat Man shook his head, then noticed the Governor and Boss Canvassman walking in his direction. The three moved to the side of the midway, between two tents, then stopped.

O'Hara looked over his shoulder to make certain that no one would overhear them, then he turned and faced Rat Man. "Have you learned anything?"

"No. But, I have a feeling. I don't know—there's just something wrong."

O'Hara nodded at the Boss Canvassman. "After the show, instead of sending the menagerie and cookhouse on ahead, I'm keeping everyone here. Duckfoot's warned the Irish brigade."

Duckfoot looked at the Governor. "What about that Larvune character, the Monarch's representative?"

"I couldn't get through to him about the problem. I explained it, but he just kept saying, 'What's the difficulty?'" O'Hara shrugged. "Anyway, he said he'd send someone, just in case."

Rat Man felt something brush his leg. He looked down to see a balding man in a formal dress suit crawling out from under the side wall of The Amazing Ozamund's tent. Rat Man reached down and pulled the fellow to his feet. It was The Amazing Ozamund. "Ozzie, what're you doing?"

The magician looked from Rat Man, to Duckfoot, to O'Hara, then back to Rat Man. There was a wildness in his eyes. "Nothing, Rat Man. Nothing! Those

rubes just squat on the benches staring at me! No applause, no Ahhh's, no Oooos! Right now I'd give my holdback for a Bronx cheer—"

O'Hara grabbed Ozzie's arm. "What are you doing out here?"

Ozzie barked out a short, bitter laugh. "Right now, Mr. John, I'm doing a disappearing act, and that's just what I intend to do: disappear!"

The Governor pointed at the tent. "You get back in there, Ozzie. Those people paid their money to see your act, and that's exactly what you are going to show them."

"Mr. John, you just don't know what it's like! You just don't—"

"You get in there Ozzie, or I'll grab one of Duckfoot's four-foot tent-stakes and give your act a new wrinkle!"

Ozzie frowned, wrung his hands, took a deep breath, then nodded. "Very well." He nodded again. "Very well." Ozzie stooped down and went back under the sidewall.

The Governor nodded at Duckfoot. "Check the back and make sure Ozzie doesn't get lost."

As Duckfoot went around the corner of the tent, Rat Man shrugged and held out his hands. "I'm sorry, Mr. John. If I'd known it would be like this, I would have steered the show away from this stand. But, there just wasn't any indication."

The Governor frowned and scratched the back of his neck. "No shakedowns, no permit problems?"

Rat Man shook his head. "The General Contracting Agent said he never had an easier time, and the squarers arranged for banners and posters with some of the best hits I've ever seen. I don't get it."

A bugle sounded, and O'Hara perked up his ears. "Five minutes to the main show." He looked up at the darkening sky. "It'll be dark before the show's done. I hope that Ahngarian from the Palace shows up before too long." O'Hara turned to go.

"Mr. John, what do you want me to do?"

O'Hara stopped, rubbed his chin, then dropped his hand to his side. "You might as well get one of Duckfoot's toothpicks and stand by with the Irish brigade. May need you."

Rat Man stood in the dark along with the canvassmen and razorbacks, and the performers who had concluded their acts. Everyone sported one of the

Boss Canvasman's toothpicks, the four-foot, hard-wood tent-stakes. A clown in makeup approached the group, picked a tent stake from a wagon, then walked over to Rat Man. The clown was muttering under his breath.

Rat Man nodded toward the main top. "Easy laughing house, Cholly?"

The clown glowered then shook his head. "I've played to faster towners, and that's a fact." The clown leaned the stake against his legs and held out his hands. They were shaking. "Lookit this, Rat Man. Just look?" Cholly lowered his hands. "It was awful, that audience, quiet as death, staring down at you from the blues. They don't even blink!" The clown smacked the stake against his left palm. "I hope they do start something, Rat Man. Have I got a case to work off?"

"What about the others?"

Cholly shook his head. "A couple of Joeys are in Clown's Alley right now—crying! Stenny, the tramp clown that works the come-in before the start of the show, tried to blow his brains out." Cholly shrugged. "Stenny couldn't find anything in the Alley but a water gun. We got the Bones watching him."

Rat Man sighed. "I never saw anything like it."

"You know how Sam always tells the customers to pipe down before the Riettes do their pyramid on the high-wire?"

"Yes."

"It was already so dead Sam didn't bother, but the quiet was so thick, Paul—the old man himself—got so nervous he almost fell off the wire." Cholly smacked the stake into his palm. "Just let 'em start something!"

They all heard the orchestra's switch in tempo, and Duckfoot stepped in front of them, swinging one of his own toothpicks. "All of you. The Windjammers're wrapping it up, so be ready."

Rat Man moved forward. "Duckfoot, that guy from the Palace ever show up?"

The Boss Canvasman nodded. "Showed up a few minutes ago." He pointed toward the lights of the main entrance. "Went in there with the Governor." Duckfoot listened to the tune. "Okay, this is it."

Everyone hefted their stakes and tensed. The music concluded, followed by dead silence. Rat Man felt

the sweat beading on his forehead. Then the sounds of many feet moving out of the blues, the regular customer seats. The Governor emerged from the main entrance with an Ahngarian, waved goodbye, then turned to the armed circus people waiting in the dark. "All you people move on into the main top—and leave those toothpicks behind." Everyone exchanged confused looks. "Go on! Move it! We don't have all night."

Rat Man dropped his stake, and the others did the same. He joined the Governor as O'Hara led the procession into the big top. "Mr. John, what is it?"

"Rat Man, you won't believe it until you see it."

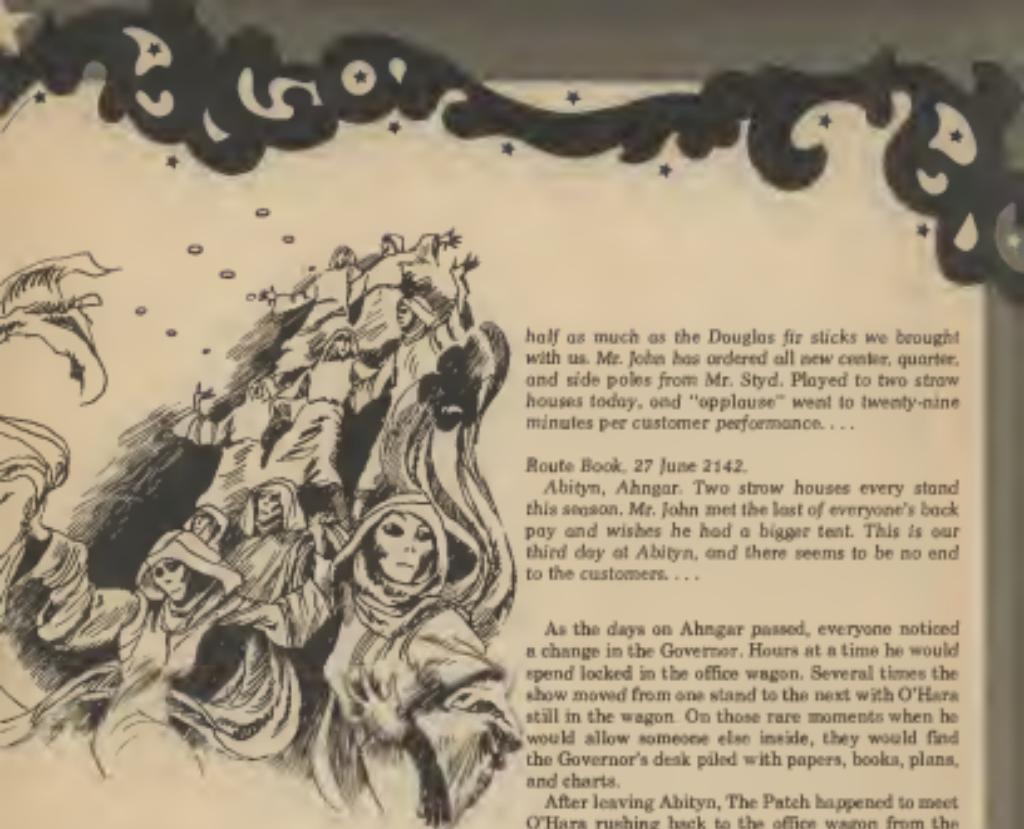
As they came to the lowest tier of seats, Rat Man Jack could see that the stone-faced Ahngarians still occupied the ends and one side of the blues, while the ones who had been sitting in the other side of blues had come down and were standing in the twin rings and around the hippodrome. O'Hara pointed to the unoccupied seats. "Up there."

They moved up into the seats, and Rat Man noticed that many of the performers were already seated, including Stenny the tramp clown. As soon as all the circus people were seated, the top again became as quiet as death. Rat Man jabbed O'Hara in the ribs with his elbow. "What's going on?"

"Shhh!" O'Hara pointed at the center of the tent. "Just watch."

The Ahngarians standing around the hippodrome track turned to their lefts, four in each rank, then began swaying as those in the center of the tent began singing. The canvas swelled with the bell-clear voices as the ranks surrounding them whirled off into a complicated series of dance steps. Soon, open places between the dancers and singers filled with Ahngarians performing complex, as well as astounding, feats of balance, with one pyramid successfully making its sixth tier. The song changed and the dancers pulled red, blue, orange, and yellow scarves from their robes and began waving and whirling them in graceful swoops and loops, all in unison. This spectacle of song, dance, and tumbling lasted for twenty-five minutes; then those in the center of the tent formed up and moved out into the night. As the Ahngarians in the blues opposite the circus people began moving down to the center of the tent, O'Hara checked his watch, then looked at Rat Man. "We're a hit, Rat Man! We have made it!" "What're you talking about, Mr. John?"

"All four groups will each do twenty-five minutes. In Ahngarian terms, that is a thundering well done."



You see, when our people were performing, they were silent so they wouldn't miss anything. What you're looking at now is the applause." The Governor folded his arms and smiled. "I think we're going to do very well this season; very well, indeed."

Route Book, 13 June 2142.

East Ossnid, Ahngar. Played to two straw houses today, but the flying squadron had to be called back since the customers insist on "applauding" the roughnecks and razorbacks—even the cookhouse gang—as parts of the show. This has made necessary some changes in marching order and scheduling . . .

Route Book, 14 June 2142.

Dorresine, Ahngar. Word about the show has spread, and there were many willing hands to spread canvas. Splintered the Number One center pole for the main tent, and Laimma Styd, local "timber" merchant, found a replacement within two hours. The new pole is stronger, more flexible, and weighs

half as much as the Douglas fir sticks we brought with us. Mr. John has ordered all new center, quarter, and side poles from Mr. Styd. Played to two straw houses today, and "applause" went to twenty-nine minutes per customer performance. . . .

Route Book, 27 June 2142.

Abityn, Ahngar. Two straw houses every stand this season. Mr. John met the last of everyone's back pay and wishes he had a bigger tent. This is our third day at Abityn, and there seems to be no end to the customers. . . .

As the days on Ahngar passed, everyone noticed a change in the Governor. Hours at a time he would spend locked in the office wagon. Several times the show moved from one stand to the next with O'Hara still in the wagon. On those rare moments when he would allow someone else inside, they would find the Governor's desk piled with papers, books, plans, and charts.

After leaving Abityn, The Patch happened to meet O'Hara rushing back to the office wagon from the cookhouse. The Governor, deep in thought, didn't notice the fixer. "Mr. John?"

O'Hara stopped, looked around with a frown on his face, then let his gaze stop on The Patch. After a moment his eyebrows went up. "Oh. It's you."

The Patch frowned. "Of course it's me! Mr. John, you better tell me what's going on. If we're in trouble, I should know about it."

The Governor shook his head. "We're not in trouble."

"Well, what's going on? What have you been doing in the office wagon all this time?"

O'Hara looked at the office wagon, then turned and looked at the show's main top. A strange look came over his face. "Patch, my whole life has been spent trying to keep a show alive; first, helping my father, now alone." The fixer saw the corners of O'Hara's eyes crinkle. "But it's not just keeping the show going. The circus itself is almost extinct." The Governor raised an eyebrow. "Do you know what Annie Oakleys are?"

"The shooters?"

circus to do nothing but clap your hands? "Applause" for second show thirty-two minutes.

Route Book, 3 October 2142.

Almandin, Ahngar. Command performance for his highness, Erkev the Fourth, Monarch of Ahngar, and the royal family. The company put on a special effort, and the king and his family put on quite a show for us, lasting forty-one minutes. Erkev IV's specialty was a display of "noffmanship," noffs being a four-legged thing with teeth like an alligator, that the Ahngarians use like horses. Erkev IV's young son (who we gather had gotten in to see a show on one of our other stands) came out in clown white and motley and did a routine that had all of our Joeys taking notes. I think we're all sad that the season is coming to a close . . .

Route Book, 9 October 2142.

Almandin, Ahngar. Laying up. The performers will play a fixed stand of the Royal Hall, while the show is "wintering," which is until Mr. John gets back from Earth. The season has been so good that the roughnecks and razorbacks will be kept on the entire time . . .

"That's what they're named after, but what are they?"

Patch shrugged. "What?"

"Comps."

Patch wrinkled up his brow and held out a hand. "Comps? Free tickets? What's that got to do with Annie Oakley?"

"Annie Oakley used to have a card thrown up and she'd shoot the ace out of it, just like the comps are punched. Do you know what else comps were called?"

"No."

"Ganeefake, ducats, snow—see, Patch, we're losing all that. Even though we have a show going, we're losing the circus." The Governor nodded, turned and headed toward the office wagon.

Patch called after him. "But, Mr. John; what are you doing in the wagon?"

"Saving the circus," he answered, then went up the steps and disappeared into the wagon.

Route Book, 19 July 2142.

Yolus, Ahngar. Blowdown. Windstorm came up without warning, and the canvas gang couldn't get to guying out the main tent in time. Duckfoot Tarzak says the old rag is a total loss, but Mr. John says he'll have a replacement in two weeks. Second show went on as scheduled without canvas to a straw house. "Applause" thirty-four minutes.

Route Book, 10 August 2142.

Dormadododa, Ahngar. New main top waiting for us. Mr. John says you can't rip the fabric even by hooking it to a couple of bulls. It looks the same as canvas, but is waterproof and very light. Duckfoot is suspicious at first, but is soon calling it "my old rag." Mechanics keeping up pretty well, but Van Number 14, carrying the power plant, went into a ditch and was totaled. Show on schedule, and another two straw houses. "Applause" thirty-six minutes . . .

Route Book, 29 September 2142.

Voltia, Ahngar. Two straw houses. Mr. John has approached several of the Ahngarians after seeing them "applaud," since their performances were especially good, and in several cases, quite unique. But none have joined the show. Mr. John says to look at it from their side. How would you like to join a



Karl Arnhelm took the chip rack from his accountant, placed it on his desk, then looked up at the Governor. "Now, what may I do for you, Mr. O'Hara? I caution you in advance that A&BCE will not let you out of our agreement."

O'Hara smiled and flipped a memory chip onto Arnhelm's desk. "Just wanted to show you this."

Arnhelm picked up the chip with his right thumb and forefinger, frowned at it, then returned his glance to the Governor. "What is it?"

"The show's books for the season on Ahngar."

"We have no interest in your show; why would I want to look at this?"

O'Hara smiled even wider. "I have a proposition to offer and you should look at that first. I think

you'll be surprised."

Arnheim shrugged, placed the chip into his desk render and studied the figures that appeared on his screen. He sat up, indexed for another part of the chip, raised his brows and returned his glance to O'Hara. "This has been audited?"

O'Hara leaned forward and pressed the code for the verification of authenticity. The machine's screen remained blank for a moment, then flashed: Audited by Forticule & Emmis, Accountants, Inc., New York. Chip comparison with copy on file: Identical. Verified.

Karl Arnheim nodded. "I admit, I am surprised. You have, according to these figures, discharged all of the show's outstanding debts and have cleared close to a million and a half credits. Very impressive, but what has this to do with A&BCE?"

"I want you to build me a starship . . ." he pulled a wad of papers and several loose memory chips from his coat pocket . . . according to these specifications."

Arnheim took the papers, opened them, then raised his eyebrows as he looked at the diagrams. "You had a good season, John, but not that good. Have you any idea what a ship such as this would cost?"

"About eighty million credits."

Karl Arnheim nodded. "And where are you going to get that kind of money?"

"You." O'Hara folded his arms. "I want you to swap me the ship for an eighty percent interest in the new show." He unfolded one arm and pointed at the loose chips on Arnheim's desk. "Those are cost figures and projections on the new, expanded show. If you'll lend me the money, I'll be able to pay it off at ten percent interest within five years. But, if you take the eighty percent, you will net about thirty-five percent return on your investment every year. How does that sound?"

Arnheim rubbed his chin, then shook his head. "As impressive as this sounds, you must realize that A&BCE has no desire to be in the circus business. As to lending you the money by financing the construction, well . . ." he held out his hands, ". . . how could I face my stockholders, especially with your record? Eighty million is a lot of credits."

"I'm not asking you to lend me the credits on the basis of my record, my honor, or my anything. Check out those projections—"

"John, you know as well as I do that circuses are disaster prone. What if—" Arnheim stopped as he noticed his accountant trying to get his attention. "What is it, Milt?"

"Karl, if we could talk alone for a moment?"

"Of course." He faced O'Hara. "If you would excuse us for a moment, John?"

O'Hara noticed the door opening behind him. "Sure. Remember to check out those chips."

Arnheim nodded and O'Hara turned and left the room, the door closing silently behind him. In the outer office, a slender man dressed in an ill-fitting suit waited. "Any luck, Mr. John?"

O'Hara shrugged. "Don't know yet. That palest accountant, Milt Stone, wanted a private skull session. Assuming we get the ship, how long would it take you to scrape up the acts and additional troupe?"

Sticks Arlo, O'Hara's director of performance, shook his head, then rolled up his eyes to look at the ceiling. "My guess is a month—six weeks at the outside."

O'Hara nodded. "Good. I'll take A&BCE's orbiting shipyard about three months to build the ship, if they get right on it. In making up the designs I made certain the designers incorporated A&BCE's standard components wherever possible. What about the additional animals?"

"The Boss Animal Man is beating the brush right now. He says the official line is a definite *no* on transporting any animals off Earth. The unofficial line is: money talks."

The door to Arnheim's office opened and the accountant emerged carrying the papers and chips. "Mr. O'Hara?"

The Governor frowned. "Yes?"

"We will have to examine all this very carefully before drawing up any papers, but it looks as though you have yourself a ship. Have you a name for it yet?"

O'Hara stood stunned for a moment, then he slapped Sticks on the arm and repeated the gesture on the accountant's arm. "Name? You bet I have a name. It's to be called the *City Of Baraboo*."

"What a curious name. Does it have a meaning?"

O'Hara slapped the accountant on the back. "I'll say it does! Baraboo, Wisconsin, is where the Big One was born. Big Bertha—Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows—the biggest circus the Earth ever saw. And when the *City Of Baraboo* takes to the star road, it will have a show half again as big as RB&BB!"

The accountant added and edged off. "Well, you'll want something in writing pretty fast, then, and so I'd best get to work."

Sticks pushed the outer office door open and held it for the Governor. "Mr. John, I never heard you say you had a name for the ship."

O'Hara stepped through the open door. "Just thought of it. *City Of Baraboo*. I like the sound of that."

"It's okay."

"Okay?"

"I mean we do have a few other things to think about right now—like putting together the biggest circus this world has ever seen, and paying for it until we can begin troupin'."

O'Hara rubbed his chin. "Hmnm." He faced Sticks, nodded, then cocked his head toward the elevators. "I guess we better get to it then."



In a room like a million other budget, no-frills, nursing-home units, an old man in his bed picked up his bowl of fibre-rich, nutritionally-amplified oatmeal, held it over the floor, inverted it, and let it fall. Nurse Bunnis opened the door and poked in her head. Immediately her painted smile cracked the layers of powder on her cheeks. "Now, now, Mister Bolin, have we dropped our oatmeal again?"

"No." Abner Bolin folded his thin arms.

Nurse Bunnis propelled her fundament into the room and looked beside the bed. "What is this, Mister Bolin? We have too dropped our oatmeal."

"No. I dropped my oatmeal. Your oatmeal is already another layer of lard on that spare tire of yours."

The nurse shook her head. "My, my, but aren't we cross today? Now, I'll send a girl in to clean up the mess, then I'll feed you myself. I know those old fingers of yours aren't what they used to be."

"Stuff it in your ear, ratbag! You get close enough to stick that foul slop in my mouth, and I'll bite off your big fat nose!"

Nurse Bunnis continued shaking her head as she reached under her arm, withdrew a newspaper, and placed it on the old man's lap. "Here's your *Billboard*, Mister Bolin."

He picked up the paper, opened it, and held it in front of his face. "Umph."

Nurse Bunnis tapped her toe on the floor and folded her arms. "Mister Bolin, if you insist on being cranky, I'll have to call the doctor."

Bolin lowered the paper and peered over the top. "You want me to tell you where else you can stuff it, ratbag?"

The nurse held her arms at her sides, turned red, then stormed to the door. She opened it, then faced the old man in the bed. "I don't see why you spend your whole allowance on that stupid newspaper. You're too old, and anyway there aren't any circuses anymore. Why don't you let me cancel your subscription? That way you could buy one of those paper-cutting games that so many of the patients are finding popular—"

A wrinkled hand reached out from behind the opened newspaper, grabbed the stainless steel water pitcher, and flung it in the general direction of the door. Nurse Bolin, from frequent practice, was into the hallway with the door closed behind her before impact. As the pitcher hit the door and clattered to the floor, Abner Bolin lowered the paper to his lap, slid down on his mattress, and lowered his head to his pillow. He felt the tears tempt his eyes, but he fought them back.

"Damned old ratbag." He let his head fall to the right and he stared at the blank, featureless wall. He saw a fading image of his old self, his motley of red and yellow satin, his red cap and bells. There was Peru Abner, dancing and falling on the shavings, the golden blasts of laughter in his ears. The calliope stomping out the steam music that sent bagpipes running home to mother, fingers stuck in tender ears. He shook his head and looked back at the door. Today is today, he thought, and prepared himself for the next round with Nurse Bolin. While he waited, he picked up his paper and began reading.

Doctor Haag, frowning through a beard and mous-

tache, came to a halt in front of the door and turned toward Nurse Bunnis.

"I cannot be bothered by every one of these old flumes that refuses to gum his oatmeal."

"Doctor, Mister Bolin became violent."

"Humph!" He turned and pushed open the door. "Well, where is he?"

Nurse Bunnis stepped into the room. The mussed bed was empty, the closet door was open, and the newspaper was scattered on the floor. As the doctor pulled his head out of the closet, Nurse Bunnis puffed her way up from the floor carrying a sheet of newsprint. "Doctor Haag!"

"The closet's empty. Have you found something?"

"Look." With a pudgy finger she pointed toward an ad line. It read: *Peru Abner, where are you?*

"What does that mean?"

Nurse Bunnis smiled. "He told me. It means that a show is looking for him." She read the ad's headline, then frowned. "This O'Han's Greater Shows auditioning in New York is where he'll be going. Should we . . . report him?"

Haag shook his head. "He's not a prisoner, and we can use the bed." He turned and left the room. Nurse Bunnis reread the ad, came to the line "Peru Abner, where are you?" then she crumpled up the paper and held it against her ample breast. She thought a moment, then nodded.

"Good for you, Mister Bolin. Good for you."

Chu Ti Ping entered her superior's office, carrying an armload of quota reports. Lu Ki Wang, production control officer for Nanking Industries, had been falling behind in his paperwork. She frowned as she noticed the office was empty. The walls were different as well. The photograph of Chairman Fan hung in its customary place, but the others—the pictures of Lu balancing the plates on the sticks, and the ones of those round-eyes in peculiar costumes—were gone. Turning to his desk, she saw a pile of empty picture frames and a newspaper. She looked more closely at the periodical and saw that it was in English, and that something was circled in red. Chu Ti Ping prided herself on her English skills and she walked around the desk to read the marked portion. It read: *Luke the Gook, where are you?*

Outside of Staunton, Virginia, parents dragging their runny-nosed brats to their riding lessons found the stable closed and both horses and trainers missing. In South Wales, four miners—all brothers—failed to report to their shift. A check of their home

found it empty. In the United Republic of Germany at a sanatorium for the incurably obese, a patient who had reached a weight of 249kg after a year of treatment suddenly disappeared, along with an astounding quantity of sausages. In Ottawa, the CBC announced the cancellation of a much-loved children's program, "Captain Billy and His Performing Dogs." In Las Vegas, police announced that they are still searching for nightclub mime Anton Etna, who reportedly walked off the stage in the middle of a performance after a drunk in the audience began singing. In Moscow, a guard commander tried frantically to explain the escape of a maximum security prisoner who was under twenty-four-hour guard, but without success. World Eco-Watch announced a slight decline in the elephant population of the Indian preserve, as well as minor decreases of a few other species in both Indian and African preserves, due most likely to the unseasonal drought. In Albany, the governor of New York walked into his media representative's office and found it empty. On the desk he found a hastily scribbled letter of resignation and a newspaper with the following line marked: *Quack Quack, where are you?*





Jon Norden looked out of the view bubble of the lounge at the starship held in the null field of the orbiting shipyard's framework. Ant-sized workers swarmed around the struts of the Bellenger pods, securing them to the ship. "Quite a sight, isn't it?"

Jon turned and saw the yard boss holding out a steaming cup of coffee. "Thanks." He looked back at the ship. "I've never seen the gangs work together so well. When I was jockeying those pods into place—you know how tricky that is—it was as though we could do no wrong. Know what I mean?"

The yard boss nodded. "I never saw components put together so fast. We're so far ahead of schedule, I'm afraid that unless that battleship deal comes through, I'll have to lay some of you guys off."

Jon snorted. "Just you try it, Jake."

"Just kidding. Tell me, Jon," the yard boss rubbed his chin, "why are the gangs so enthusiastic about this one? We've built bigger ships. Remember the *Otso!*?"

Jon sipped at his coffee. "The *City of Baraboo* is different, Jake. It's funny, since the *Baraboo* has the same design as an attack transport, with all those heavy cargo shuttles. But it's a circus ship. This ship will never be used for killing. Not that I'm a pacifist—I couldn't work here if I was. But . . . I don't know."

"I think I know what you're getting at."

"Jake, have the work orders for the special fittings been approved yet? Except for running up a few nuts and doing the shakedown, she's about ready to go."

The yard boss shook his head. "No. We have the parts made; all that's left is installing them. Must be some foulup down in the main office."

"Aren't we doing an attack transport soon? The company could have saved a bundle if we'd done this ship and the transport at the same time."

Jake shrugged. "As far as I know the deal's either been postponed or it fell through. The head office is getting a lot of static from the government over doing business with the Naumilian Empire. The union was about to take a position against it, too. I don't think A&BCE wanted the bad press."

Jon looked back at the *City Of Baraboo*. "Jake, I want to rotate downstairs early. Okay?"

"Sure. It's your paycheck. With nothing but the fittings left, I won't need you. Trouble at home?"

Jon studied the ship as he shook his head. "I'm not certain."

John J. O'Hara punched his treasurer in the shoulder. "Jingles, it's all downhill from here!"

Jingles McGurk looked at the Governor with a sour expression. "If you call nothing in the bank going downhill. Mr. John, the money we're getting from the show on Ahngar is only letting us break even."

"Isn't that good?"

"What about the small matter of paying off the *City of Baraboo*?"

"Pooh! Once we hit the star road with the new show, we'll have that crate paid off in five years." O'Hara turned to his rented office door. "Jingles, you should see the acts we'll have! They're coming from everywhere. You remember Waco Whacko?"

"Sure. The guy with the pythons." Jingles shivered.

"He's been teaching school on a planet named Ssendiss, but he's on his way here with twenty snakes you wouldn't believe. That's what they have on Ssendiss—snakes, they run the place. But what an act!"

Jingles shook his head. "I better get down to the bank. They're a little nervous about those checks we don't have covered."

"They'll be covered. I never saw such a chilly bunch!"

Jingles smiled. "You are still young, Mr. John, for an old man."

As Jingles turned and walked off, O'Hara frowned, shrugged, then opened his door. Seated at the Governor's paper- and plan-littered desk was a young man. He was leaning back in the Governor's chair and had his feet on the Governor's desk. The young man nodded. "You must be John O'Hara."

"I am, and who the hell might you be, and why are your feet on my desk?"

The young man removed his feet and sat forward, elbows resting on the desk. "My name is Jon Nor-

den. I'm with the A&BCE shipyard."

O'Hara pursed his lips, then sat down in a chair facing his own desk. "Is there trouble?"

"If you call losing your ship 'trouble'."

O'Hara stood. "Explain yourself!"

Jon looked up at him. "I'll bet you a million credits against a handful of bolts that you don't hold title to the *City of Baraboo*."

"Not until I pay for it, I don't."

"And when will you pay for it?"

O'Hara snorted. "I can't see how this is any of your business, sonny!"

"I'll tell you this much, grampaw: unless you plunk down eighty million credits, cash on the barrelhead, you are going to lose your ship. A&BCE, using your reasons as a cover, are building an attack transport for the Nuumiaan Empire. The plan is to sell them the ship, get the cash in hand, and be done with it before either the government, the people on Earth, or my union knows about it. When they are presented with an accomplished fact, everyone will shrug and go home, and A&BCE will be ahead to the tune of a lot of credits. How does that grab you, grandpaw?"

O'Hara dropped into his seat. "How do you know this?"

"I work at the yard. Right now the *Baraboo* is the stock frame for an attack transport. All those special fittings to turn it into a circus ship have not been installed. I did a little nosing around, though, and came up with something interesting. All those fittings necessary to turn that ship into a war vessel are waiting at the yard. My guess is that after selling the ship, the military fittings will be placed aboard and installed enroute to Nuumia."

"But A&BCE has an agreement with me!"

Jon nodded. "You deliver eighty million credits, and they deliver one ship. But you haven't paid anything yet, have you? I don't think A&BCE ever expected you to. But building a circus ship is still a good cover story for building a warship." Jon leaned back in the chair. "What are you going to do?"

"Are you at liberty, sonny?"

"Am I in need of a job? I guess I will be after this. What did you have in mind?"

"That ship will need a crew."

Jon shook his head. "Don't you think you ought to get together with a lawyer—or an army of lawyers? You can't stop A&BCE with—"

"Now's my time to teach you something, sonny. We don't squawk copper. We'll handle it ourselves. Now, are you interested in that job?"



Jon Norden sat slouched in a chair watching The Patch burn up the hotel room rug with his pacing. The thin, black-clad man clasped his hands behind his back, unclasped them and folded them over his chest, stepped, shook his head, then held out his hands. "I wonder if Mr. John ever stopped to think how much he asks of me?"

Jon smiled and shrugged. "I'm new here myself!"

"Bah!" Patch dropped his arms to his sides, then resumed his pacing. The thin man held his hands at the sides of his head, scowled, muttered an oath or two, then stepped in front of the room's paper-littered coffee table. He picked up the agreement O'Hara had made with A&BCE, glanced at it, then picked up the uncompleted registry certificate. He threw them back onto the table. "Bah!" He paced for a while longer, then stopped and faced Jon. "You see, Mr. Norden, the Governor has a dream. Humph! A dream. He isn't content making a living at running a show; he's got to make a route out of the entire Quadrant—maybe the Galaxy! And to do that, he wants to take on one of the biggest corporations on Earth, not to mention the biggest military force in the Quadrant!" He held out his hands and shook them. "Not! He wants me to take them on!" He frowned at Jon. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr. O'Hara said that I should help you however I can."

"Help? Help? What kind of help?"

Jon shrugged. "He said the ship will need a crew. I'm a fully ticketed ship's engineer."

"A crew? Doesn't the man know that he has to have a ship before he needs a crew? What does he plan to do—pirate the *Baraboo*?"

"It could be done."

"Eh?"

"I said it could be done. The crew at the yard could

man the ship. We even have a shuttle pilot up there, Willy Coogan. He's got a master's ticket."

Patch sat down on the couch behind the coffee table and rubbed his chin. "Would they?"

"Would they what?"

"Pirate the ship."

Jon laughed, then shook his head. "Hey, I was kidding."

"But would they do it? Could you get them to do it?"

"I don't know about you, buddy, but I don't plan to live out the rest of my days on one of the penal colonies. The Quadrant Admiralty Office would drop us like a ton of steel."

The Patch leaned back in the couch, crossed his legs, and folded his arms. "Mere detail, my boy. Mere detail. If I could guarantee that no one goes to jail, could you get a crew to pirate—excuse me, to take possession of that ship?"

Jon frowned, studied his strange companion for a moment, then nodded. "It's possible. My union never has been hot on the idea of slapping up ships for the Nuumilians. But how are you going to keep us out of jail?"

The Patch leaned forward, pawed at the papers on the coffee table, then pulled out a sheaf of papers from the pile. "Let's see what this show has for entertainment, first."

Jon squirmed uneasily in his chair for a moment, then leaned forward and held out his hands. "Wouldn't it be a better idea to get a lawyer working on this?"

The Patch looked up, glared over the top of the papers at Jon, then looked back at the papers. "Humph!"

Karl Arneheim looked at the hooded figure of the Nuumilan ambassador seated in the chair opposite his. Even though the hood shadowed the figure's face, Arneheim could see those cold, dark eyes examining him as though he were a bug. The ambassador held out an arm in Arneheim's direction, and the grey sleeve of the Nuumilist's robe slid back exposing a blue-green, four-fingered hand. "And, Mr. Arneheim, when may we expect delivery on the attack transport?"

"Six days, Ambassador Sum. Orders to install the

fittings have been given; and the test run still needs to be done; but after that, it's yours. Is your crew ready?"

The ambassador waved his hand, indicating the affirmative. "The crew is on one of our cruisers waiting in neutral space. You understand, Mr. Arneheim, that your crew must bring the ship outside the Solar Identification Zone?"

"Yes—"

Arneheim's office door hissed open. His secretary, face flushed and brow furrowed, entered at a half-run. "Mr. Arneheim, you—"

Arneheim stood. "What is the meaning of this behavior, Janice?"

The secretary nodded her head at the ambassador, then turned to Arneheim. "I am sorry, but you should look at this right away!" She extended her arm, and in her hand was a sheet of white paper and a slip of yellow paper.

Arneheim bowed to Ambassador Sum. "Please excuse me." He turned to the papers, and as he read, his eyebrows elevated with each sweep of his eyes. "Is this someone's idea of humor?"

Ambassador Sum stood. "If you would care to be alone, Mr. Arneheim . . ."

Arneheim held out a hand. "No . . . no, Ambassador Sum. This concerns you, as well. O'Hara . . . he has presented me with a check for eighty million credits." Arneheim waved the white sheet of paper. "He has assumed title to the ship, and has registered it." He turned to his secretary. "The printing on this check—it's still wet!"

Ambassador Sum placed his hands inside his sleeves. "I thought you said that this O'Hara couldn't possibly raise the money in such short order."

Arneheim frowned. "He can't. Look, the check is drawn on the First National Bank of the City Of Baraboo. That's the name of the ship!" Arneheim gave his head a curt nod. "They won't get away with this!" He reached out a hand to energize his communicator, but before his finger touched the button, the screen came to life. It was the superintendent of the A&BCE orbiting shipyard. "Yates! Just the man I wanted to see. About that ship—"

The man on the screen shook his head. "It's gone, Mr. Arneheim."

"Gone?"

"Gone."

"What do you mean, Yates? How can it be gone?"

"One of the shuttles we sent down two days ago for fuel and supplies returned a few hours ago. There

was a man—his name was Wellington; tall skinny guy—anyway, he presented the proper registration papers. Then his crew unloaded and released the ship. They docked the shuttle to the ship, took on the crew and yardworkers, then left—"

"The yardworkers? You mean he's got my yard gang, too?"

"Yes, Mr. Arnsheim. I would have called sooner, but the communications up here have been tampered with—"

"Shutup for a second, Yates!" Arnsheim frowned, looked down for a second, then looked back at the screen. "Yates, the other nine shuttles—where are they?"

The image on the screen shrugged. "As far as I know, Mr. Arnsheim, they're still downstairs being loaded."

Without signing off, Arnsheim punched off the screen, punched in a code, and waited for an answer. The screen came to life. The image on the screen smiled. "Eastern Regional Spaceport. May I help you?"

"Give me the freight terminal." He turned to the Ambassador. "O'Hara has his bunch at a hotel near Eastern Regional—"

"Freight terminal."

Arnsheim turned back to see a nondescript image. "I want to see the manager."

"You're looking at him."

"I am Karl Arnsheim. Those shuttles from the A&BCE yard—"

"Oh, you're Karl Arnsheim!" The image smiled. "Well, sir, let me tell you that I never saw a smoother operation. Those shuttles touched down and were loaded in an hour and a half. Those circus people certainly have loading down to a science—"

"The shuttles; where are they?"

"Why—they left over an hour ago—"

Arnsheim punched off the screen, punched in another code and waited. "Ambassador Sam, is your vessel prepared to chase down the Baraboo?"

"It is."

An image appeared on the screen. "Ninth Quadrant Admiralty Office"

"This is Karl Arnsheim. I've had a ship pirated. I will need a Judgements Officer at Eastern Regional in ten minutes. Transportation is already arranged."

"Yes, Mr. Arnsheim. Will you need an enforcement company?"

Arnsheim looked at Ambassador Sam. The Am-

bassador motioned for Arnsheim to cut the sound. Arnsheim did so. "It would be better, Mr. Arnsheim, that if there is killing to be done, it be done by the Quadrant authorities."

Arnsheim looked back at the screen and cut on the sound. "Yes, I'll have all the necessary papers with me." He cut off the screen and turned to the Ambassador. "Half of O'Hara's show is still on Ahngar. That's where he'll be headed."

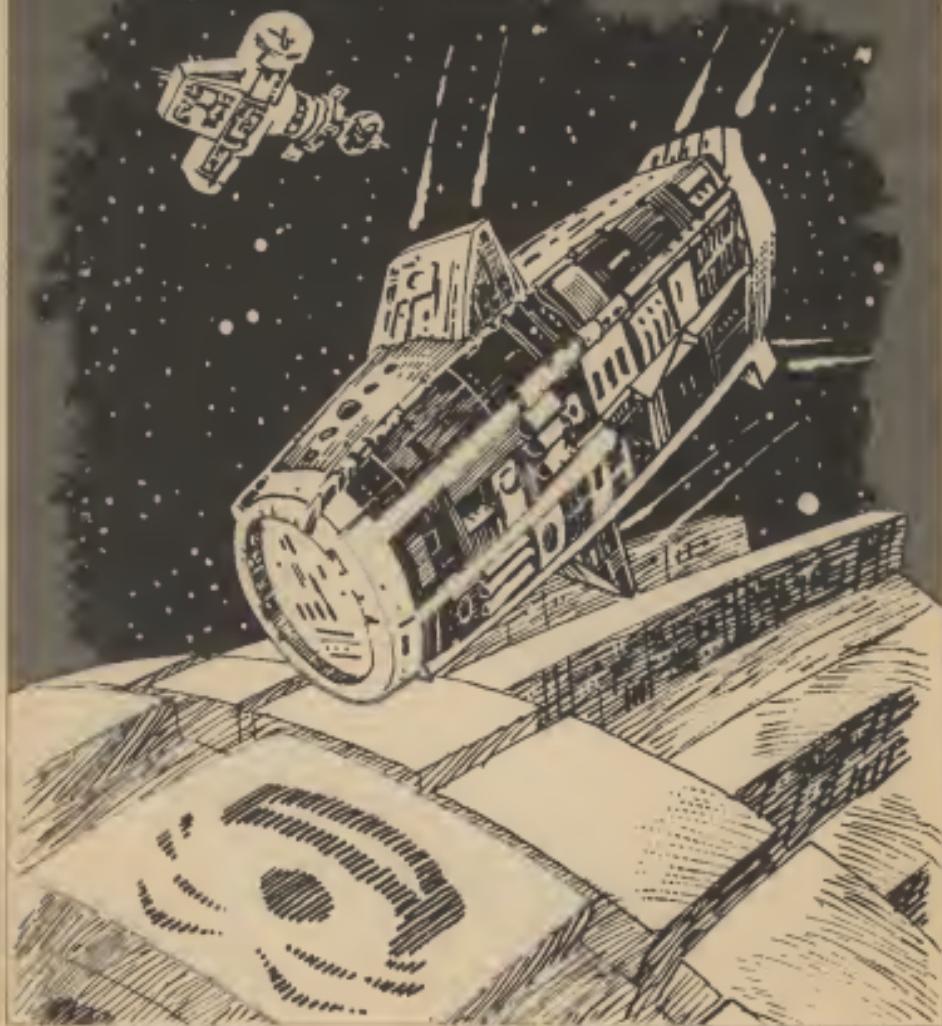
"You are coming as well, Mr. Arnsheim?"

Arnsheim barked out a short laugh. "No one—and I mean no one—is going to stick me with an eighty million credit rubber check! I am going!"

As the shuttle streaked to make orbit with the Baraboo, Patch and the newly christened Pirate Jon Norden moved to the pilot's compartment. The Governor was sitting in the co-pilot's seat staring at a tiny viewscreen. He looked up from the viewscreen as they entered. His eyes were red-rimmed. The Patch frowned. "Is something wrong, Mr. John?"

O'Hara turned back to the screen and pointed at it. It showed Earth. "Before we loaded I took a little trip to where the old Madison Square Garden used to stand. Do you know why some of the performers and roughnecks call the main entrance to a lot the Eighth Avenue side, and the other sides are named after streets? The old Garden was flanked by Eighth and Ninth Avenues and by Fifty-first and Forty-ninth streets. Eighth Avenue was the main entrance side. RB&BB used to start off their season there before going under canvas and hitting the road. Circus people just got used to calling lot sides after the streets surrounding the Garden." The Governor shook his head. "RB&BB is gone, and so's the Garden." He turned his head and faced The Patch and Pirate Jon. "The streets are still there, but that's all."

O'Hara turned back to the viewscreen. "When I was a kid and my father was the Governor, he used to have the vans drop off the horses and wagons about ten miles from the stand. The Governor would ride up front in his buggy, and right behind would be the Boss Hostler driving the first wagon. It was the grabber—a cage wagon. In it was Mousy Duan, our wildman, and a beautiful, huge Siberian tiger that used to sleep with Mousy. But when they were in the cage, Mousy would crouch at one end and the



tiger at the other, hissing and growling at each other, and wrestling between times.

"After the attention-getter would be more cage wagons pulled by eight-horse teams, then the show wagons. They were mounted with mirrors and were painted with pictures of clowns and animals and trimmed with whorls of gold carvings. Then, tail-and-trunk, came the hauls. At one time we had twenty of them. Then, more show wagons and the horse piano would bring up the rear. After the steam music would come the kids. It was . . . as though the

passing of the wagons caused the soil to generate a parade of kids. It didn't matter where we were. The vans would unload the wagons in the emptiest countryside you ever saw, and in minutes the road behind would be filled with waving hands, laughing faces, and eyes filled with sparkle . . ."

O'Hara rubbed at his eyes, then looked back at the viewscreen. "Earth no longer has a circus, and the circus no longer has Earth. I can't help feeling that they're both a little less because of it."

The Patch felt the tears blur his vision, and he

looked out of the forward viewplate at the bright dot in the black of space that would soon expand to become the *City Of Baraboo*. Patch nodded. He had ridden those wagons behind the old Governor and his apple-cheeked son. He looked back at O'Hara and nodded to himself. He was beginning to see what the Governor meant about saving the circus.



The Nuumian battle cruiser sped into orbit around Ahngar after its week-long chase, and in seconds its skin bristled with guns and sensors. The *City Of Baraboo* was immediately located in a fixed orbit; the Nuumian ship matched the *Baraboo*, then launched a shuttle. On board the shuttle, Judgements Officer Ali looked from Karl Arnhelm's bright-red, shimmering face, to the death-cold demeanor of the Nuumian Ambassador. Captain Green, commander of the enforcement company, entered the compartment, nodded toward Arnhelm and the Ambassador, then turned to Ali. "All set."

Ali nodded. "They appear cooperative, but keep your troops on their toes. We don't know what to expect from them," he nodded toward the Nuumian, "nor from them."

The Nuumian co-pilot of the shuttle opened the forward compartment hatch and stepped in. He bowed toward the Ambassador, jabbered in Nuumian, then turned and left. Sam announced to them all, "We are about to dock. The co-pilot informs me that we'll be using the after-compartment exit."

Ali felt the shuttle lurch a bit, then he heard port locks slamming home. He slapped Green on the shoulder. "We're docked; let's go."

They moved into the after compartment and stood by the exit door at the head of Captain Green's thirty-man enforcement company. Each man was in combat armor and sported an array of destructive weapons. As soon as the port indicators showed safelight, Green threw the dogs on the door, spun the wheel, and pulled open the door. The *Baraboo*'s port was already open. Standing in the brightly lit airlock was a tall, thin man dressed in black. "Welcome to the *City Of Baraboo*. My name is Arthur Burnside Wellington. I am the legal adjuster for O'Hara's Greater Shows."

Arnhelm pushed his way through the men, then stopped and pointed a finger at The Patch. "That's him! The one who pirated the ship. What are you waiting for? Arrest him!"

The Patch raised his eyebrows. "Why, Mr. Arn-

heim, how good of you to come. I must compliment you on the *Baraboo*'s performance. Your company did an excellent job, and everybody says so!"

Arnhelm's finger shook as he screamed at the Judgements Officer. "Arrest him!"

Ali nodded at Green, who in turn had a couple of his troops escort Arnhelm a few feet away to cool off. The Judgements Officer then turned back to The Patch. "It appears, Mr. Wellington, that there is some doubt concerning the title to this vessel."

The Patch frowned, then shook his head. "I can't imagine what that could be. The agreement stated that good title would revert to John J. O'Hara upon full payment for the *Baraboo*." He reached into his coat pocket. "I have a notarized statement here that payment was presented to the offices of A&BCE and accepted by them."

Ali smiled. "There seems to be some doubt as to the check's worth."

"Doubt?" Arnhelm pulled free, then came to a stop next to Ali. "It's not even a legal check. There is no such thing as the First National Bank of the *City Of Baraboo*, and if there is, it's not legal. What nation's laws is it incorporated under?"

The Patch shrugged. "Why, our own, of course. The *Baraboo* is a self-registered vessel, which means that, on board, we are only bound to follow our own laws. We incorporated our own bank."

"Ridiculous!" Arnhelm turned to Ali. "Tell him! Tell him, and then arrest the entire lot of pirates!"

Ali shrugged. "There is such a law, Mr. Arnhelm. It was devised quite a number of decades ago to eliminate the complications of national allegiance to a planet or country that a ship sees only rarely. If they have a bank, there is no reason to believe it isn't legal."

Arnhelm pulled a folder from his pocket, then pulled a yellow slip of paper from it. "What about this check, then? If it's no good, then you don't have title!"

The Patch rubbed his chin. "Have you tried to cash it?"

"Of course not!"

The Patch shrugged. "Well, there you are. If you would deposit that check, your banker would have sent it to the central clearing house, then on to us, and you would have had your money. We can't be blamed if you fail to follow normal business practices."

Ali looked at Arnhelm. "Well, Mr. Arnhelm?"

"If I had waited for this check to clear, who knows where they would have been when it bounced."

"Until such time as it bounces, Mr. Arnhelm, I'm afraid there is nothing I can do."

Arnhelm tapped his toe, then nodded. "Very well." He turned to The Patch. "Show me where this Bank of *Baraboo* is. I would like to cash a check."

The Patch looked at his watch, then shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Arnhelm, but it's after three and the bank is closed."

Ali folded his arms. "Perhaps, Mr. Wellington, this

time the bank could make an exception?"

The Patch read what was in the Judgements Officer's eyes, then smiled. "Of course. If you gentlemen would follow me?" He turned and went through the inside door to the airlock, then walked a few paces until he came to a door marked First National Bank of the City of Baraboo in crayon. The door hissed open, and The Patch, Arnhaim, Ali, Sam, and Captain Green entered. The room was bare, except for a folding table and a chair. On the table was a cheap, tin cash-box. The Patch pulled out the chair, sat down, folded his arms, and smiled at Arnhaim. "May I help you, sir?"

Arnhaim threw the check onto the table. "Cash this!"

The Patch looked at the check, turned it over, then put it on the table and pushed it toward Arnhaim. Arnhaim turned to Ali. "You see? He refuses to cash it."

The Patch cleared his throat. "Sir, you forgot to endorse the check."

Arnhaim slowly pulled a pen from his pocket, stooped over, endorsed the check, then pushed it back. "Now, cash it!"

The Patch studied the check. "My, my, but that's quite a sum. Are you certain you wouldn't prefer a draft that you can deposit back on Earth?"

"Cash it."

"Would you care to open a savings account with us? Our interest rates are very good—"

"Cash it . . . now!"

The Patch pulled the cash box in front of him, then looked up at Arnhaim. "It's a set of dishes with each new account, sir—"

"Cs— cs—" Arnhaim blew air in and out a few times. "Right now. Right now. Cash it."

The Patch shrugged then opened the box. With his left hand he reached into the box and withdrew a handful of credit notes. "I hope millions are all right, sir. We don't carry anything smaller. One, two, three . . ."

Arnhaim picked up one of the million-credit notes and stared at it open-mouthed. Then he held it out to Ali. "This is an obvious forgery!"

" . . . seven, eight, nine, ten . . ."

The Judgements Officer took the bill and examined it. His hands started to shake, and he handed it back. "I assure you, Mr. Arnhaim, it's quite genuine."

Arnhaim watched in horror as Patch continued counting. ". . . fifteen, sixteen, seventeen . . ."

"It can't be!"

Ali shrugged. "It is." The Judgements Officer smiled. "Sorry."

Ambassador Sum stepped forward. "Officer Ali, does this mean that Mr. Arnhaim will not gain possession of the ship?"

"As long as there are seventy-nine pieces of paper to match that one, he won't." Ali studied the Numismatist. "I would advise you to do nothing foolish."

" . . . fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three . . . " They all

watched as The Patch went through and wound up the count . . . seventy-eight, seventy-nine, and eighty. "There you are, Sir. Are you certain we can't interest you in one of our rainy-day accounts?"

Arnhaim scooped up the bills, counted them twice, then stuffed them into his coat pocket. "You tell O'Hare that he hasn't seen the last of this!"

The Patch smiled. "Oh, then you *will* open an account with us? Perhaps one of our sunshine accounts? Christmas club?"

Arnhaim appeared to be headed for a fit and Ali had two troopers escort the man from the room. He remained behind as the others returned to the shuttle. "Mr. Wellington?"

The Patch closed the box, looked up and nodded. "Yes?"

"Just between you and me, where did you get the eighty million?"

"Perhaps you would like to meet the president of the First National Bank of the City of Baraboo." A door at the back of the compartment opened and in stepped a very small person in a clown suit and makeup. Ali studied the figure for a moment, then realized that the bone structure under the makeup wasn't human. "May I present His Royal Highness, Prince Ahssiel, Heir to the Crown of Erkev IV, Monarch of all Ahngar. He is also one of the Joys in Clown Alley. His father is First National's largest—and I can safely say—only depositor. Your Highness, this is Officer Ali of the Ninth Quadrant Admiralty Office."

The prince bowed, then straightened up. "I am pleased to meet you."

Ali looked at The Patch, then back at the Prince. "Your Highness, could you explain how these people ever talked your father into giving them eighty million credits?"

The Prince shook his head. "No. It is a deposit, and I am here to look after my father's money. I am the president. My father said that it is a good trade for a future monarch to learn." The Prince nodded toward The Patch. "And after Mr. Patch explained the scheme to the Monarch, my father also said that a voyage with Mr. Patch would be both an unusual and a valuable education."

The Patch frowned, folded his arms and snorted. "Your Highness, I'd hardly call it a scheme."

"Excuse me. I remember now." The Prince smiled at Ali. "It is not a scheme; it is a fix. But the best part is that I will study with Peru Abner Bolin, the greatest clown in all the Universe!" The Prince turned toward The Patch. "May I go now, Mr. Patch?"

The Patch nodded. "Remember, your father said not to clown around too much." The Prince nodded and left running.

Ali nodded, then leaned on the table. "So, you're a circus fixer." The Patch nodded. "Well, fix this. How am I going to make it back to Earth without laughing in Arnhaim's face every time I see him?"

The fixer rubbed his chin. "If it was me, I'd stay in my cabin." And Ali did.

THE STAR SHOW



Tyll Straag opened her eyes, then closed them against the day's endless run of uninspiring work. She turned her slight frame onto her left shoulder and pulled the thermo-sheets up to her ears. It was always the same: get dressed, hurry through the morning frost to the cow shed, monitor the milking and feeding banks, program the estate control for the day's operation, then back to the house for Aunt Diva's version of a wholesome breakfast. By the time she had choked down the last pattry of soycake drenched in soyssyrup, Ennivaat, the planet Doldra's sun, would be peeking over the horizon.

Uncle Chaine would then make his appearance, a thin greying beard hiding an alcohol-reddened face; and the day's chores would begin in earnest. Repair the dungchuck, monitor the sludge pool, fiddler out for the herd, don't forget to wrap the expeller pipes to keep the separated milk from freezing, wood for the house, shovel off the old compost, we're trying a new formula this year—and so on, and so on.

Tyli snuggled into the covers, cursing whatever it was that had awakened her. She tried to drive her mind blank, praying that sleep would return her to her dreams. A clank from outside of the window marked the end of her prayers. Throwing back the covers, she sat up and looked through the window to see Emile Schone's freckled face peering from beneath a cloth hood and muff. Tyli pushed open the window, bracing herself against the icy draft. "What do you think you're doing, Em? I don't have to get up for another hour."

Emile grinned, displaying gaps where his front teeth had departed in preparation for his second set. "The circus, Tyli. It's here."

"So what?" Tyli grumbled at her friend, then shrugged. The night's sleep was a lost cause. "Where are they?"

Emile turned and pointed away from the window. Tyli craned her neck to look in the direction indicated by her friend's ungloved finger. In the distance, across the fence marking the limit of Uncle Chaine's property, silhouetted against the dull orange of the morning sky, were the wagons. Drivers, their collars turned up against the cold, hunched their shoulders against the night. The massive Percherons pulling the wagons shot out clouds of steam, as their heavy hooves clopped against the frozen ground. The markings on the wagons were still invisible, but everyone on Doldri under the age of twenty knew what was painted there: O'Hara's Greater Shows—The Great One.

"C'mon, Tyli. They'll be gone soon."

Tyli turned from the window, and felt in the dark for her leggings and underwear. She pulled them on, shot her arms into her lined shirt, then stuffed her feet into her boots and zipped them up. Stuffing in her shirt, she reached to the back of the door and removed her parka. As soon as the sun broke the horizon, it would be too warm for the coat; but until

then, it was needed. She sealed the seam on the parka, stood on the bed and pushed open the window. Placing her hands on the sill, she vaulted over the sill, coming to a stop on the frozen soil. She reached up and pulled the window shut. "Let's go."

The two ran to the fence and stopped to look at the wagons. Close up, the markings were clear, as well as the paintings of tigers, lions, clowns, flyers, flags, elephants, snakes, horses, and riders. Below the paintings revolved the painted-sunburst wheels, their steel rims grinding against the gravel.

"Booh, Tyli, but aren't they something?"

One of the wagons came abreast of the pair. The driver looked down and nodded. "You boys off to see the show? We'll be making our stand in Coppertown before noon."

Emile nodded. "Sure, Mister. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

The driver waved a hand. "Come on up, then. We always need boys to help spread canvas."

Emile pulled at Tyli's sleeve. "C'mon, Tyli!"

Tyli frowned. "I don't know, Emile. My aunt and uncle will be up soon. I've got my chores."

The driver pulled up his team of six horses, then smiled. "You boys help with the canvas, the boss canvasman will give you free passes to the show."

Emile stamped his foot. "C'mon Tyli!"

Tyli looked back at the house, the windows still dark. She turned to her friend. "Let's go!"

The pair climbed up the wheel onto the driver's seat and squeezed in next to the black-hatted man holding the reins. He laughed, shook his head, then caused the horses to move forward with a clucking sound. "You boys gonna get whipped for this, aren't you?"

Emile gulped while Tyli raised an eyebrow at the driver. "Maybe," she answered. "And I'm not a boy."

The driver squinted at Tyli, then shrugged. "Don't tell Duckfoot you're a girl. He don't want nothin' but boys on the canvas."

"That's dumb."

The driver nodded. "We tearing Stavak before we came here to Doldri." He laughed. "They don't have either boys or girls on Stavak!" The driver shook his head. "Duckfoot's all right, kid; he's still got a little Earth left in him, that's all."

Tyli looked back over her shoulder to see the seats of other wagons crammed with kids, while the overflow paraded behind. "What's that last wagon?"

"That's the horse piano. The boiler cracked on it night before last in the cold, so we can't use it. If it

was playing, you'd see kids coming from all over." The driver looked behind, raised his eyebrows, then turned back to the front. "Looks like we're doing all right, even without the steam music." He turned toward Tyli. "You think it's worth it? Runnin' off like this and gettin' a whippin'?"

Tyli frowned, then shrugged. "Don't know. I never seen a circus."

The driver looked forward, over the backs of the six-horse team, then he nodded. "It's worth it."

The Boss Canvasman rubbed his chin and looked down at the girl. "As long as we got them, all we use is boys."

Tyli stuck out her lower lip. "How many of these boys do you want me to whip to prove I'm as good as they are?"

Duckfoot Tarzak lifted his head and roared out a laugh. He shook his head and looked back at the girl. "My, my, but aren't you a sweetie pie? How old're you, kid?"

"Thirteen. And I can do anything I've seen you apes doing around here."

Duckfoot raised his eyebrows, then raised his glance at the tractor that had broken down as they came on the lot. He pointed at it. "Can you drive a cat?"

Tyli looked at the HD-17—a smaller version of the machine she used almost every day at her uncle's farm. "Nothing to it."

The Boss Canvasman pointed at the tractor. "Well, Sweetie Pie, get that cat started up and bring it over here."

Tyli glowered at the name, then turned and stomped off toward the tractor, heedless of the great spool wagons being hauled into place by a tractor doing double duty. She climbed up into the seat, lifted the starting lock, pushed the right pedal into neutral, then pressed the starter. When nothing happened, she tried the button twice more, then nodded as she turned her head to glare at the Boss Canvasman. Duckfoot's back was toward her as he directed the placement of the spool wagons. Gangs of canvasmen and boys were attacking the wagons already in place, pulling from them the huge, rolled sections of the main top.

Tyli got down from the seat, stood on one of the treads, and pulled up the tractor's side access panel. Her eyes quickly checked out the starting system wiring while her fingers tested for loose connections. She wiped a clot of mud from one of the wires, no-

ticed the insulation under the mud was broken, then she tugged at it. The wire came apart. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a pocket knife, opened it, then stripped the ends of the wire. After she had spliced the wire and secured it to keep the unspliced connection from grounding, she hit the starter. The cat roared to life, and Tyli looked in the direction of the Boss Canvasman. Duckfoot's back was still toward her, and amidst the roars and clatter of the lot, he hadn't noticed the cat start up.

Tyli grinned, released the pedal and pushed forward the hand throttle. The cat moved forward and she pulled back on the left brake, pushed the throttle full forward, and came riding down upon Duckfoot at full speed. As she reached the Boss Canvasman's side, she killed the throttle, pulled the left brake hard, then pulled both brakes as the cat swung in front of Duckfoot, bringing the machine to a jerking halt. Duckfoot looked down at his feet. The heavy cleated tread of the cat was a centimeter from the ends of his toes. He looked back at the girl. "It's about time." He cocked his head at one of the empty spool wagons. "The roughnecks over there'll hook you up. Get it out of here." He pointed at a spool wagon being pulled away by the other tractor. "Follow Cheesy to the wagon park." Tyli nodded, pushed the cat into reverse, and backed up to the spool wagon.

"Who is the kid on the cat?"

Duckfoot pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped his forehead as he turned to face the Governor. "Did you see that? The punk almost ran me down."

The Governor nodded. "How old is he?"

"He is a she, and she's thirteen."

O'Harn shook his head. "Too bad. She's awfully good with that cat. But on this planet, she's too young."

Duckfoot rubbed his chin. "You know, she fixed that cat before she started it. I put her on the one that broke down just to get her out of my hair. She fixed that thing just like that."

O'Harn frowned, thought a moment, then shook his head. "This is one planet where I don't want to tangle with the coppers. A few years ago this used to be a penal colony. They had a revolution and kicked out the eighteen-planet council that ran the

place. Since then they've developed their agriculture to where they supply products to a quarter of the Quadrant, but they also established their own police. A mean bunch."

The Boss Canvasman shrugged them thrust his hands into his pockets. "So nobody runs away and joins the circus on Doldra."

"Not unless they're eighteen, they don't." The Governor turned and headed for the office wagon. Duckfoot watched as the girl's tractor pulled off the spool wagon, then he shook his head and began checking the lace-up of the canvas sections.



The station officer at the Coppertown Police Office looked up at the visitor. The clean hands and natty threads marked the fellow as from off planet. "What's your business?"

"My name is Tensil, Officer. . . ?"

"Lieutenant Sarrat."

The visitor smiled. "Lieutenant Sarrat. I'm here to talk to you about the circus visiting your fair city."

The station officer shrugged his massive shoulders. "What about it?"

The man motioned toward a chair. "May I sit down?"

Sarrat nodded. "What about it? And what's your name?"

The man lowered himself into the chair. "Pardon me, Lieutenant. My name is Franklin Tensil. I am here representing the Arnhem & Boon Circus."

Sarrat cocked his head to one side. "The name of the outfit here in Coppertown is O'Hara's Greater Shows."

Tensil nodded and grinned. "Of course, of course. Well, I am certain you understand how one circus's

reputation affects every other show. . . ."

"Get on with it Tensil."

"Tensil. Ten-sill." The man smiled. "You may not know that O'Hara's uses child labor to erect its tent."

Sarrat shrugged. "Everyone on Doldra uses child labor. After the revolution there weren't enough adults. The population on Doldra is very small, Tensil."

The man let the pronunciation pass. "Yes, but what would happen if some of those children decided to join O'Hara's?"

"This isn't a prison, Tensil. So what?"

Tensil shrugged. "Well, when the show leaves Doldra, it'll bring the kids with it—"

"No! No one under the age of eighteen leaves Doldra."

Tensil smiled. "Nevertheless, I'm certain that a few will try it. If you would check out the show, and—"

"Get to the point."

Tensil nodded. "I see Doldra has a more sophisticated police authority than the usual run of rural planets. No doubt it has something to do with your past experience with the law." Tensil rubbed his chin, then reached into his coat and withdrew a wallet. "Lieutenant Sarrat, I am authorized to offer you a certain sum of money in exchange for certain services."

"How much?"

"Direct and to the point. I like that. I won't haggle over quarters and halves. My authority extends to an offer of five hundred thousand credits."

Sarrat raised his eyebrows. "I see. And what must I do to earn this ransom?"

Tensil leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. "The show in Coppertown. It must be crippled, once and for all. The laws on Doldra are strict, and the penalties severe. Find the laws that O'Hara is breaking, then . . ."

"Throw the proverbial book at them."

Tensil grimed. "Exactly." Tensil reached out his hand. "Is it a deal?"

Sarrat stood, leaned over his desk, extended his hand, and slapped Tensil across the face, bowling him into another desk. At the sound, another officer entered the room. Sarrat pointed at Tensil. "Shackle him."

The officer pulled Tensil upright, whirled him around, then encased his wrists in chain and cuffs. When the officer was finished, he pushed Tensil until the man stood shaking in front of Sarrat's desk. "Lieutenant, I . . . I don't understand!"

"Mr. Tensil, I shall now give you a lesson in the treatment and prevention of crime. We have very little of it on Doldra for two reasons: the certainty of punishment, and its horror. Because of our past experience with the law, as you put it, we both understand the need for it to maintain an orderly, peaceful society, and why the enforcers of the law must be incorruptible. There are no crooked cops on Doldra, and bribery is a severe offense. We have three punishments in our system: restitution, torture, and death. The punishment for bribery is torture, the length of the ordeal to be determined by the size of the bribe." Serrat grinned. "It is unfortunate that your employers are so generous."

"Serrat, you can't—"

"Book him." The officer dragged the screaming Tensil from the room. Lieutenant Serrat pressed a button on his desk, and in a moment another officer came into the room. "Marchon."

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

Serrat pursed his lips and frowned. "This circus at the edge of town, I think we ought to check it out. There may be some violations of the child exportation statutes."

Tyli, her eyes still dazzled, her ears still ringing, walked from the customer's entrance to the main top at the conclusion of the afternoon show. Emile pulled at her arm. "Come on, Tyli. We better be going back."

She frowned and turned to look at her friend. "What? I wasn't listening."

"We have to go back. All the kids are heading home."

She sighed. "I guess so. But wasn't that something?" She looked back at the main top. "Wasn't that something?"

"Tyli!" At the sound of her Uncle Chaine's voice, Tyli froze. She saw him emerging from the entrance, his face bright red and twisted in anger. As he approached her, he raised his hand to strike her.

"This time, Uncle, you better kill me. If you don't, I'll kill you."

Her voice was cold and steady. Chaine's hand trembled for a moment, then he lowered it to his side as a fist. "You ungrateful whelp! Running off without doing your chores, and after Diva and I took you in, cared for you, fed you, put clothes on your back—"

Tyli held out her calloused hands. "Look at these, Uncle! I've paid for everything I've gotten from you a hundred times over. I didn't ask to be taken from

the adoption lists and put at slave labor on your farm." Tears welled in her eyes. "I didn't ask my parents to die in your dumb revolution!"

Chaine grabbed her by her arms and turned her toward the main entrance to the lot. "You think anyone would adopt such a brat, and at your age?" They left the push of the crowd, and Chaine spat on the ground. "Kill me, will you? The only reason I didn't thrash you on the spot is because of all those people. But when I get you home . . ." He shook her arm violently and squeezed it hard. Tyli bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"I swear, Uncle, if you beat me again, I'll kill you." Her words tumbled out through her tears. "I swear it, Uncle!"

Chaine's eyes narrowed. "Why you—" He felt a very heavy hand clamp onto his shoulder. "Whan?" The hand turned him around and Chaine found himself looking at the chin of a human mountain. Tyli covered her face to hide her tear-streaked cheeks. The big man laughed.

"Now, Sweetie Pie, don't be shy. Introduce me to your friend."

Tyli sniffed and cocked her head at Chaine. "This is my uncle—not my uncle, really. He . . ." she winced at Chaine's grip on her arm. "He's my guardian Uncle Chaine, this is Duckfoot Tarzak. He's Boss Canvasman with the show."

Chaine gave a curt nod. "How'd you know Tyli?"

Duckfoot smiled. "Why, Sweetie Pie pushed a cat for me this morning to get a free pass to the afternoon performance." Duckfoot nodded at Tyli's arm. "That's quite a grip you've got there, Chaine." The Boss Canvasman held out his own hand. "It's a pleasure to meet a man who knows how to treat women and handle kids."

Chaine shrugged, released Tyli's arm, and grasped the Boss Canvasman's hand. Tyli looked in horror at the pair. Chaine was very proud of his grip, and she watched as the two each tried to outsqueeze the other. Chaine's face reddened still further, but Duckfoot simply grinned. "It's . . . a pleasure to . . . meet you, Duckfoot." Chaine's knees began to sag.

Three dull cracks and the color draining from Chaine's face signaled the end of the contest. Duckfoot released the farmer's hand, then slapped him

on the back. "Yessir, Chaine, folks here on Doldra sure are friendly." Chaine weaved on his feet while Duckfoot looked toward the wagon park where several roughnecks were cutting up jackpots. "Hey, yo, Carrot Nose!"

One of the roughnecks got up and walked over. "What's what, Duckfoot?"

The Boss Canvasman slapped Chaine on the back again, sending the man sprawling in the dust. "Mr. Chaine's looking a little pale. Thought you'd be kind enough to show him to the infirmary."

Carrot Nose picked Chaine up out of the dust. "Sure thing, Duckfoot. My, Mister Chaine, but you are pale, aren't you? Come along, now."

Chaine sagged against the roughneck, then looked over his shoulder as the man dragged him toward the infirmary. "Tyli, you be at home when I get there." Carrot Nose grabbed Chaine by his hand, causing the farmer to groan in pain.

"Sorry about that, Mister Chaine. Just trying to steady you. Come along, now."

As the pair left, Tyli looked up at the Boss Canvasman. "Thanks, but you don't know what trouble I'm in now."

Duckfoot studied the girl, then rubbed his upper lip with a sausage-sized finger. "Where are your parents?"

"Dead." She looked into Duckfoot's eyes, pleading.

The Boss Canvasman looked back. "You're gonna have to ask. I don't want anybody to ever have cause to say that I talked you into something."

Tyli made two fists and shook her head as fresh tears streamed down her cheeks. "I can't!... it's against the law, and you'll get into trouble. The law'd kill you—"

Duckfoot placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you let me worry about the details?"

Tyli looked in the direction of the infirmary wagon, then dried her eyes and looked at the flags flying from the main top. She turned back to Duckfoot. "All right. I want a job."

Duckfoot nodded, put his huge arm around her shoulders, then steered her toward the dressing top. He looked up in the air and half talked to himself as they walked. "We'll be on Doldra another six weeks, so the first thing is to make you invisible. We'll see what Iron Jaw Jill can do. Then I better

talk to a couple of people." He looked down at the girl. "Well, First of May, how does it feel being part of the show?"

Tyli sniffed, then laughed. "Scared. Scared to death."



Tyli stood red-faced in the center of the circle of ballet girls while Iron Jaw Jill poked and prodded at her in her scanty ballet costume. "Might be able to pack the upstairs to fill out the costume." She smacked Tyli on the bottom. "And the downstairs." Iron Jaw shook her head and scratched the wart on her nose. "I can't figure out what to do with the legs, though." She looked at Duckfoot. "Can't hide her in the ballet, Duckfoot. She'd stick out like an ostrich in the middle of an elephant parade."

Duckfoot rubbed his chin and nodded. "Got to do something, though." He pointed at Tyli's head. "Wouldn't she look better without her hair tied up like that?"

Jill stood behind Tyli and worked at undoing the knots. The girl's hair, white-blond and wavy, came down and hung below the small of her back. Iron Jaw Jill turned to one of the ballet girls. "Diamonds, get over to the kid show and get Fish Face. Tell him it's important."

The girl ran from the dressing top. The Boss Canvasman raised his eyebrows. "You thinking of putting Sweetie Pie in the kid show?"

Jill nodded, then pushed around Tyli's mass of hair. "It just might work."

Fish Face Frank, the kid show director, came into the top and nodded at Duckfoot, then Jill. "What is it, Iron Jaw? I'm a busy man."

Jill grabbed two handfuls of Tyli's hair and held it straight out from her head. "Fish Face, how would you like a Mop-Haired Girl?"

Tyli frowned as Fish Face walked over and began fingerling her hair. He nodded. "We've never had a Mop-Haired Girl before. It's an old gag; but it'll

work, especially on a planet full of rubes like this one." He dropped her hair, rubbed his chin, then nodded again. "Right, I can put her between Bubbles and Willow Wand." Fish Face saw the confused look on Tyli's face. "That's the Fat Lady and the Living Skeleton."

Tyli frowned and glared at Duckfoot. "You're going to let them put me in a *freak show*?"

The Boss Canvasman laughed. "Until we get off Doldra, it's perfect."

Tyli pouted. "A freak show."

Fish Face raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "Don't let any of them hear you call them freaks."

Tyli snorted. "Well, what do you call them?"

"Artistes. Come on. I'll introduce you and then we'll see about making you into a Moss-Haired Girl."

As she was leaving, Duckfoot called after her. "And, don't forget you still push a cat for me!" He shook his head and turned to Jill. "What do you think, Iron Jaw?"

Iron Jaw Jill scratched her wrist. "She'll cut it. She's a good kid."

The Boss Canvasman walked to the top entrance and watched Fish Face leading Tyli to the kid show. He noticed the Governor crossing the lot toward the office wagon. "Mr. John!" The Governor stopped as Duckfoot ran from the tent.

"What's up, Duckfoot? I haven't seen you run since the number three pole splintered and almost parted your hair."

"Mr. John, I have a small boon to beg."

The Governor squinted then jabbed a finger at the Boss Canvasman's chest. "How many years in jail is this going to cost me?"

Duckfoot held out his hands and shrugged. "Mr. John, they don't have jails on Doldra."

O'Hares nodded. "I know. Restitution, torture, and death."

The Boss Canvasman shrugged again. "Well, then in either case it won't take up much of your time."

The Governor pursed his lips, then turned toward the office wagon. "In that case, fire away."

Tyli's skin crawled as Na-Na the Two-Headed Beauty Who Proves That Two Heads Are Better Than One finished blowdrying the girl's hair. During the evening performance, Na-Na had given Tyli instructions to rinse her hair in a foul smelling concoction, which she had done. Afterwards, with the other female "artistes" observing, Na-Na armed

herself with a comb in one hand (controlled by Na) and a blowdryer in the other (controlled by Na) and put the finishing touches on Tyli's coiffure. With the hair frizzed up around her face, Tyli felt as though she were peering out of a hairy tunnel.

"Well, Na, how is that?"

Na frowned, then pointed with her hand. "It could be fluffed up a bit there, don't you think, Na?"

"You're right, Na. Work on it with the comb a bit while I dry it some more, will you?"

"Of course, Na."

"Thank you, Na."

Tyli had been astounded at the sight of Na-Na. Each head was ravishingly beautiful, but there was one too many. She shook her head.

"Hold still, now, Sweetie Pie."

"Yes, Na-Na." Tyli frowned and peered through her hairy tunnel. At its end, seated on three chairs, Bubbles the Fat Lady—700 Pounds of Plentiful Puckishitude—observed the process.

The mountain of flesh waved an arm. "You should have put more beer in the rinse, Na-Na. It would stand up better."

"I think it's standing up just fine, Bubbles. Don't you agree, Na?"

"Yes, Na."

Tyli felt a hand on her shoulder, and she jumped off of the bucket upon which she had been sitting. "I didn't mean to startle you, Dear," said Na. "We're finished. Take a look in the mirror."

"Yes, do," said Na.

Tyli turned and glanced once at Na-Na, then turned toward a portable mirror leaning against a trunk. Turning her head slightly from side to side, she marveled at her new appearance. Her hair, now white, stood out straight from her head in all directions, almost completely covering her face. Bubbles chuckled. "She looks like a snowball on top of a post."

Tyli looked at herself again and had to agree. Her hair stood out well beyond her shoulders. She smiled, then faced Na-Na. "This looks pretty neat."

"Well," answered Na, "we will have to trim it a bit to make it perfectly round."

"I agree," said Na. "But not too much."

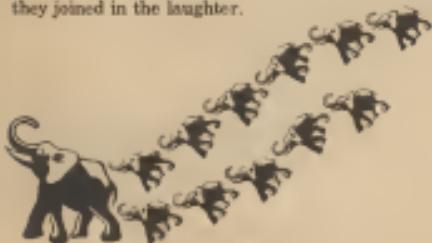
Willow Wand Wanda, The Living Skeleton, entered the tent. "Duckfoot says to beat it so he can tear down the side show. You can put the finishing

touches on in the shuttle."

She heard a great bellow of laughter coming from outside the entrance. Immediately, two female midgets, glowers on their faces, stormed inside and headed toward one of the trunks. As they sat down to change their costumes, they kept their backs toward each other. After another bellow of laughter, Big Sue, the Giantess, stooped through the entrance, tears streaming down her cheeks. Bubbles looked up at Sue. "What's so funny?"

Sue sat on a trunk, slapped her knee, then dried her eyes with a hankie about the size of a bedsheet. She cocked her head toward the two midgets. "Tina and Weena were on the lot next to the office wagon arguing at the tops of their lungs. Tina says 'You're a liar, Weena! I am too shorter than you!' And Weena comes back with 'That's only because you hunch over, Tina!' The Governor opens the pay window on the wagon, looks down at Tina and Weena—"Small talk," he says, then slams the window shut!"

Tyli held her hands to her mouth to keep from laughing, but it was to no avail. Bubbles shook and Na-Na laughed twice as hard as anyone. Tyli looked at the two midgets. They glanced back at each other, frowns still on their faces. The frowns melted and they joined in the laughter.



At first, the inhabitants of the side show jarred Tyli's nervous system. Nearly all of the artistes were married: Bubbles to the Ossified Man, Na-Na to the Three Legged Man, and Tina and Weena to other midgets. Big Sue had a hot steady going on with Dog-faced Dick, the Wolfman; while Willow Wand Wanda was making moon eyes at Ogg, the Missing Link. At first the relationships seemed preposterous, if not impossible. But by the time the show made its stand at Battleton three weeks later, Tyli was an "artiste" while everyone else—with the exception of the other artistes—belonged to "other world."

The Wolfman, cuddled like a puppy in Big Sue's lap, would occasionally wax philosophic about "our world." "I don't know how many times in a season I get asked why I would want to put myself on exhibition. I suppose about half as many times as I get asked why I don't kill myself." Sue would scratch behind his ears. "Out there in other world, looks are everything. It's the same here. The only difference

here is that in our world we can be proud of our looks—proud of what we are."

"Gee, Dog Face," Tyli said, "I kind of wish that my act was more like yours, instead of a product of stale beer and bleach."

The Wolfman smiled, exposing his over-long canines. "Look, Sweetie Pie, all of us have a little bink in our acts. Look at these." He tapped his teeth. "Caps. And I paint my nose black, and you should hear me growl and howl." He nodded at Big Sue. "These steel bars that Sue ties into knots are just wire-filled rubber. It's what the customer sees that's important."

Early in the morning and late at night, putting up and tearing down the show, Tyli would push one of Duckfoot's cats. The canvassmen called her the Mad Snowball after she added a drooling idiot wrinkle to her act at Fish Face's suggestion. Insanity increased the attraction; and it also relieved her from answering embarrassing questions from the customers, any one of whom could have been a copper.

At night, after loading the cat at the runs, she would drag herself off to the performers' shuttle and fall into her bunk exhausted. She had little time to think of Chaine and Diva, or of the police. Just before she slept, she would sometimes try to recapture the images of her mother and father; but their memories were too distant. By the time the show had reached its last week on Doldra, she realized that she had a new home and a new family.

There was one relationship that puzzled her, however. The only meal she ever could eat with Duckfoot was lunch, and each time they sat at the picnic tables together with Diane, Queen Of The Trapeze. Duckfoot and Diane would chat and laugh, and after a while, Tyli realized that she felt that Diane was crowding a little on her property rights. She would watch the beautiful flyer and the ugly canvassman talk while she did a slow burn. On the next-to-the-last-stand at lunch, the canvas of the cookhouse flapped in the wind while Diane and Tyli sat together. Diane looked up at the flapping canvas, then began eating her food.

Tyli frowned. "Aren't you going to wait for Duckfoot?"

Diane shook her head. "With the wind up, he'll be standing by at the main top with the guyng-out gang. He won't eat until he's certain it's safe."

Tyli experimentally poked the food on her plate, then she looked up at Diane. "Diane?"

"What, child?"

Tyli put a forkful of food into her mouth and talked around it. "What do you think of Duckfoot?"

Diane's eyebrows went up. "Why... what a strange question."

Tyli shrugged. "You always sit with him. I just wondered why."

Diane lowered her eyebrows, then nodded. "Is there

any reason why I shouldn't eat with him?"

"No. No reason. I just wondered what he is to you."

Diane nodded. "Well, I don't see him much because we work in different squadrons of the show, so sometimes it's hard to tell. That's why I have to look at this every now and then to make sure." Diane pulled a golden locket from the front of her costume and showed it to Tyli.

The girl frowned. "Duckfoot gave you that?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is it that it makes you sure of?"

Diane opened the locket, withdrew a folded piece of paper, then carefully unfolded it. She held the paper out to Tyli. "That he's my husband."

Tyli half-strangled on a mouthful of food. When she had finished coughing, she looked at Diane's kind face, then at the marriage contract. She looked

back at Diane. "But . . . but, you're so beautiful!"

Diane smiled. "And so's Duckfoot."

Sweetie Pie, the Moss Haired Girl, did not have her mind on her work for that evening's performance and did not hear the call as it worked its way through the show people. "Sherry your nibed Coppers on Sweetie Pie!" She sat on a chair, pondering a new feeling of loneliness, watching the customers watch her. A sharp jab hit her in the arm and she turned toward Bubbles. "What'd you do that for?"

"Sherry your nibs," Bubbles whispered out of the side of her mouth.

"What?"

"Sherry your nibs, Sweetie Pie. Coppers."

Tyli's eyes darted about in her head. "Where? Bubbles, where do I go?"



"Get off the stage and hide in the laps of the kid show top. Moee!"

Tyli stood, went to the back of the stage and ran down the stairs. She looked about, found a fold in the canvas where it was pulled aside for the entrance to the dressing top, then she ran and hid in the fold. She waited for what seemed like years, until her heart stopped at the sound of Chaine's voice. "She's with this show somewhere. My brother told me she had on a big white wig."

Another voice, deep and cold. "You up there?"

"Yes, cutie!" answered Bubbles' voice.

"Where is Tyli Strang?"

"I don't know any Tyli Strang, cutie, but if you're buying, I'm selling. Isn't he one hunk of man, folks?"

Laughter. "No nonsense. I want Tyli Strang!"

"But cutie, I want you!" More laughter.

"Now, just a minute, buster!" wheezed the eighty-pound Ossified Man. "You better quit making a play for my wife or I'll come down there and give you what for!" More laughter.

"Hey, lady, whatcha doin' in there?"

Tyli turned to her left and saw a small boy gawking at her. "Go away."

"Why's your hair look funny?"

"Go away!"

The little boy pouted, then rubbed an eye as he pointed at Tyli and began screaming. A man ran up and placed a hand on the little boy's shoulder. "What happened son?" The man looked at Tyli. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing, noth—" The canvas was whipped aside and Tyli found herself looking into the face of a large, tall, Doldran Officer of Police. Standing a few feet behind the copper was her uncle Chaine, smiling.

The copper grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the tent. "Tyli Strang, you are under arrest upon complaint of your guardian." She saw several other officers in the crowd, and two of them were hauling the Governor to a police van. A crowd of canvasmen rushed around the sideshow stage, each one carrying one of Duckfoot's toothpicks. The officers dropped their hands to their guns.

"Hold your horses!" Tyli heard Duckfoot's voice, then saw him as he mounted the stage. He pointed

a finger at the roughnecks. "Drop those sticks. All of you! Now!" The canvasmen looked at Tyli, the officers, then at Duckfoot. She looked at Duckfoot as the officer began dragging her off.

"Duckfoot! Duckfoot!"

One of the canvasmen reached down to pick up a tent stake. The last Tyli saw of the Boss Canvasman, he was leaping through the air to tackle the roughneck that had disobeyed his orders.



The judge, wearing what Tyli recognized as a mountain revolutionary's rosette on his black collar, turned his emotionless face toward the arresting officer. "What charges do the police bring before this court, and who is it that is to be charged?"

A captain of police moved from a side table and halted before the judge's bench. "The first charge is desertion from a lawfully appointed guardian, and the one so charged is Tyli Strang." The captain pointed at Tyli. She stood to the left of the bench, her hands shackled in front of her. Similarly shackled, the Governor stood next to her studying the judge's face. "The second charge is attempted abduction of a minor from the planetary population, and the one so charged is John J. O'Hara." The captain pointed.

The judge lifted a sheaf of papers and held them out toward the captain. "Identify these."

The captain moved closer to the bench, examined the papers, then nodded. "Those are the facts concerning the charges now before the court."

The judge turned toward Tyli and the Governor. "Have copies of these charges been made available to both of you?"

Tyli nodded, her eyes wide with fear. The Governor frowned. "Judge, are we allowed to have someone represent us in one of your trials?"

The judge nodded. "If you wish. Is your representative in the court?"

The Governor looked over his shoulder at the half-empty room. Neither Patch nor Duckfoot was there. "I'm sorry, Judge, but he isn't here yet."

The judge looked back at the papers in his hands. "Then we shall proceed. Whenever your representative shows, he may continue your defense." The judge turned toward the clerk. "We are ready, then. Under the charge of desertion, record Tyli Strang; under the charge of attempted abduction, record John J. O'Hara. Under both charges: for the police, record Captain Hansel Mendt; for the court," the judge turned toward O'Hara, "record Anthony Scialelli."

Tyli saw the Governor silently form the name "Scialelli" with his lips, then an officer led the two to the defendant's dock where they remained as the police captain began his argument. The entire time, O'Hara stared at the judge.

That evening in the holding room, Tyli watched the Governor standing before the room's only window staring at his own thoughts. "Mr. John?"

He turned and looked at the Moss-Haired Girl. At the center of her enormous ball of white hair, two wide, frightened eyes searched the Governor's face for hope. "Doesn't look good, does it, Sweetie Pie?"

Tyli looked at the rough plank floor. "I'm sorry. I know Duckfoot got you into this because of me."

O'Hara walked over and stopped beside her. "Look at me!" Tyli looked up into his face and saw the blackest frown that she had ever seen on anything, with the possible exception of Gorgo, the gorilla in the menagerie. "I am John J. O'Hara. Nobody gets me into anything I don't want to get in."

"Yes, Mr. John." Tyli watched as O'Hara went back to the window, then, again, lost himself in thought. "Mr. John?"

Without moving, the Governor answered. "What is it?"

"Who is Anthony Scialelli?"

"The judge."

"I know that, but who is he? I saw you looking at him like you knew him."

The Governor looked down, pursed his lips, then looked up at the night sky. "I guess if your dogs had been in with the flyers you would have heard about Scialelli, *L' Uccello*. That means 'The Bird'. That's what he was called twenty-five years ago: *L' Uccello*." The Governor faced Tyli. "You should have seen him on the trapeze, like liquid fire whirling through the air. A bird is such a clumsy creature compared to

Scialelli against the canvas of the main top."

"He was with your show on Earth?"

The Governor nodded, then turned back to the window. "Anthony, his wife Clia, and his brother Vito were the Flying Scialellis. The two seasons they were with us were the best the show ever had." He held out his hands. "Everything else in the show was just filler. The push came to see the Flying Scialellis." O'Hara lowered his hands, then rubbed his chin as he continued to stare out of the window. "Anthony and Clia were the perfect lovers. If it hadn't been for their act, they probably would have been famous just for how much they were in love." O'Hara turned and shrugged. "It's a very old story."

"Vito fell in love with Clia?"

The Governor nodded. "Vito was the catcher, so when Clia made it clear that she didn't love him and found his advances offensive, Vito plotted to get rid of Anthony. At least, that's the way most of the show people figure it. The Scialellis never worked with a net. That night they were in the middle of their over-and-under routine. Vito would do his knee drop and ready himself to do the exchanges. Clia would go first on the other bar, swing, then do a single somersault as she left the bar and come to rest holding onto Vito's wrists. Then, on the next swing, Anthony would come out; and at the same time he left the bar and somersaulted toward Vito. Clia would release and head for the bar. They would do that six or seven times in quick succession."

The Governor turned back to the window. "Maybe Vito was upset and got his signals crossed, maybe he wanted to kill Clia. In any event, she went down. I remember Anthony and Vito still hanging on their bars, swinging, looking down at the sawdust while a crowd rushed out to Clia's body. They both came down the tapers together; then Anthony calmly walked over to Vito, grabbed him around the neck, and broke it. Vito died instantly." O'Hara shook his head. "We did everything we could, but we couldn't prove that Vito was responsible for Clia's death. So, Anthony was condemned to the penal colony, here, Doldria."

"Mr. John, does he blame you for being sent here?"

"I don't know. But in court he went mad—screaming threats at every and anything." O'Hara sighed.

Mr. John, what's going to happen to us?"

"I'd just be guessing."

Tyli sniffed, then held her hands to her eyes. "I wish Duckfoot was here—and Diane. And my friends from the kid show . . ."

O'Hara walked over and placed his hand on Tyli's shoulder. "Duckfoot and The Patch were working on something to get us out of this mess. I didn't want to tell you because it might not have been possible." He shrugged. "I guess it doesn't make any difference now."

Tyli lowered her hands and looked up at O'Hara. "What was Duckfoot going to do?"

"Adopt you. That would have taken care of both the desertion and abduction charges. But if they did manage to get someone in authority to sign the proper papers, they didn't get it done in time."

"Adopt me?" The Governor nodded and went back to the window. "Tyli Tarzak." After trying the name to see how it fit her tongue, she decided she liked it.



Later that night, Tyli and the Governor were again in the defendant's dock. The police captain sat at a table, arms folded, face grim. The Governor frowned as Duckfoot and The Patch emerged from the door behind the judge's bench. Duckfoot marched straight for the spectators' chairs and sat down next to Diane, his face an impenetrable mask. The Patch faced the Governor, shrugged, then went to the chairs and seated himself next to Duckfoot. The room was silent for a moment, then Judge Scialetti emerged from the door and took his seat behind the bench. As was the custom on Deldra, no one rose.

The judge placed a paper on the bench, then turned toward the defendant's dock. "Mr. Tarzak and Mr. Wellington explained to me Mr. Tarzak's intention

of adopting you, Tyli Strang." He looked back at the paper. "However, since the adoption was not made final prior to the time charges were brought—and still is to be made final—it has no bearing on the charges before the bench." He nodded toward the police captain. "Since the police have completed their argument, we shall now hear from the defendants." He looked at the girl. "Tyli Strang, what do you say to the charge of desertion?"

The Governor held out his hands. "Just one minute, Scialetti! You said we could have representation. Where is it?"

The judge closed his eyes, tapped his fingers on the bench, then looked at O'Hara. "I've heard all that your fixer has to say on the subject. He doesn't appear to be able to refute any of the charges that have been brought against you." He looked at Tyli. "What do you have to say about the charge of desertion?"

Tyli swallowed, then looked back at Duckfoot and Diane. The both nodded their encouragement. Tyli looked back at the judge, then folded her arms. "I left. And I'd like to know who wouldn't. The adoption people that assigned me . . . that assigned me to Chaine's farm, they sent me to prison. But now I have . . . I have . . ." Tyli felt the tears choking her. "But now I have a family . . . people who respect me, and love me. Yes, I left Chaine's farm. And if the law says that's wrong, then the law's dumb! That's all I have to say!" Tyli covered her face with her hands, then leaned against the Governor as he put his arm around her shoulders.

The judge turned his glance from Tyli to O'Hara. "John J. O'Hara, what do you have to say about the charge of abduction that has been brought against you?"

The Governor looked up from Tyli, then studied the judge's face. "She speaks for both of us."

The judge held O'Hara's stare for a moment, then returned his glance to the paper on the bench. "Captain Mendt, do you have any rebuttal?"

The captain laughed, then got to his feet. "They admit it. They admit everything. What is there to rebut? The adoption laws were made to care for the many orphans left over from the revolution, and they are good laws. The abduction law was made to prevent just this very thing: strangers from off planet taking our children to put them on the baby black-market, or worse. Look at her now! Look at her hair. We found her in a *freak show*!" He waved his hand in disgust. "The letter of the law is clear. To excuse



them would make jokes both of our law and our revolution." The captain sat down and folded his arms.

The judge nodded, studied the paper on the bench, then looked back at the captain. "Captain Mendt, we fought a revolution to build a society of laws that served justice rather than politics or privilege. And, for the past ten years, we have given our laws strict, often brutal, application." The judge shrugged. "Perhaps that is a necessary given of revolutionary zeal. But the revolution is a decade old, Captain. Perhaps now there is room beside the letter of the law for that justice we seek."

The captain jumped to his feet. "You can't do—"

"I am the judge, Captain. Do you wish to check

the law on that?"

"Judge, these are valid charges. You can't just find them innocent without committing a crime yourself!"

Judge Scavelli nodded, then signed the piece of paper on the bench. "Captain, I have just executed the adoption instrument that will make Tyl Strang the legal child of Diane and . . . Melvin Tarzak."

Several of those in the courtroom turned toward Duckfoot and mouthed the name "Melvin?" Duckfoot didn't notice.

"Since she has been adopted prior to being found guilty of desertion, the desertion charge is ruled groundless. For the same reason, the charges against

Mr. O'Hara are ruled groundless." He turned to the defendant's dock. "You both are free to go."

As Duckfoot and Diane raced The Patch to Tyli's side, the Governor watched Judge Scavelli stand and go through the door behind the bench. O'Hara stepped down from the dock, walked around the bench, and entered the judge's chamber. Scavelli had opened his collar and was behind a desk, leaning back in a chair. "Anthony?"

The judge looked up, then smiled. "Hello, Mr. John."

"It's still Mr. John, is it?"

"You're the Governor." The judge motioned toward a chair. O'Hara nodded and sat down.

"I suppose I should thank you for what you did in there."

Scavelli shook his head. "Thank Captain Mendt. He's the one who made it clear that this court's choice was between Tyli growing up chained to a farm or on the lot of a circus." The judge studied the top of his desk. "That's where I grew up. I can't think of a better place for Tyli than the lot of O'Hara's Greater Shows." He looked at the Governor. "The law was meant to protect Tyli's interests, and it has done so."

O'Hara frowned. "That Captain Mendt. Can he make trouble for you?"

Scavelli shook his head. "What I did was strictly legal. You have to understand something about Mendt." He nodded and raised his eyebrows. "About all of us that were condemned to this place, including myself. You cannot imagine the nightmare that awaited the convict on Doldra. The prison ship would land, push the cons out of the hatch, then it would take off. Absolute freedom, in a sense; stark terror in another. There were gangs of thugs—thieves, murderers, rapists, terrorists, maniacs—that roamed the hills, taking what they wanted, warring among themselves, slaughtering anything that stood in their way." Scavelli pursed his lips. "Shortly after I arrived on Doldra, a gang was formed by those who wanted a rule of law rather than force. For fourteen years we slugged it out with the other-gangs, and

then with the authorities. Now we have our own protections against brutality and are free to trade, with no world using Doldra as a human dump. To Captain Mendt—and myself—what we have and the rule of law that made it possible are sacred." The judge shrugged. "But, like all religions, I suppose it closes our eyes to certain realities. Humanity is one of the things our laws lack. We still have a long way to go."

The Governor nodded, then looked at the Judge. "Anthony, what about coming back to the show? Our flyers are the best, and with *L'Uccello* for a coach . . ."

The Governor stopped as the judge held up his hand. "No, Mr. John." Scavelli smiled. "Follow the red wagons." His eyes sparkled as he shook his head. "No, Mr. John, the wagons will have to leave without me this time. I've invested a lot of years in what's happening on Doldra, and I want to protect my investment. I'm not at liberty."

O'Hara nodded, then sat looking at the judge until the silence became uncomfortable. The Governor stood. "Well, I suppose if you have something more important to do—"

Scavelli stood and faced the Governor. "Not more important, Mr. John, but as important. On Doldra we're what we are because of what we were. It was a grim place, and we're all a little grim as a result. Bring the show back when you can. We need to laugh, wonder, and dream more."

They shook hands, then O'Hara went through the door, closing it behind him. The courtroom was empty, and he stood next to the judge's bench, looking at the rudely constructed room for the first time: a drab setting for a man who once wore spangles flying above a cheering crowd. The Governor touched the rough surface of the judge's bench, then smiled as a breath of envy touched him. Duckfoot Tarzan stuck his head through the door at the back of the room. "You coming, Mr. John? We're gonna blow the next stand unless we move it."

O'Hara withdrew his hand, nodded, then followed the Boss Canvasman into the night.

Fred sighed at the pile of dirty dishes Margie had left, shrugged his shoulders, and tied the pink ruffles of the apron around his waist. *Fordan cursed the host of stone-dropping creatures as he swung his mighty arms and clutched his shield. "Mystor, the evil sea-witch, shall rue this day," he swore.* He pushed the dishes from the counter into the sink, gave them a squirt of soap, and turned on the hot water. With a sweep of his mighty blade, *Fordan drove the slime creatures into the foam—the blood of Ajax, his stalwart friend who had disappeared beneath the waves. The battle-blood pounded in his veins as he turned the waters of the scalding waterfall upon the foe.*

Fred reached into the sudsy water, took a dish, swished the dishcloth over it and placed it in the drain rack. *"Hur!" Fordan joined battle and grappled with his bare hands as one of the slime creatures struggled to climb back on board. A smile on the warrior's lips, Fordan broke the creature's back, then flung it upon the shore.*

Wiping his forehead on his left sleeve, Fred noticed the tiny cleaver still on the cutting board. He shook his head and picked it up. Thick congealed grease coated the blade. He ripped off a paper towel, wiped the blade, and tossed the cleaver into the sink. *The creatures fought well. Driven to the deckhouse, Fordan unleashed his axe and drove them back into the water. He spoke a final farewell to his trusty blade, wiped the gore from it upon his healing chest, then flung the axe into the foam. The screams of a dying creature tore at the fabric of that evil night.*

Billy came in, feeling guilty about watching TV while his father cleaned the kitchen. "Need some help, Pop?" Vor drove the demons from his heart, struggled to the deck to face the horror, standing next to his brave father. "It is I, your son Vor. I shall stand with you, Father!"

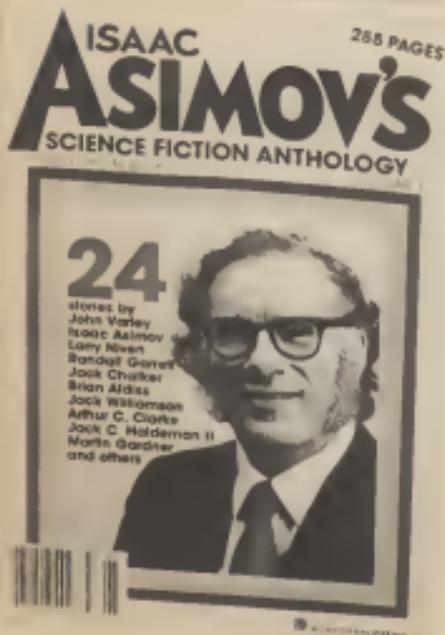
Fred cocked his head toward the rack. "Sure, kid. Grab a towel." *Fordan turned to see his son standing firmly upon the blood-washed deck. "Aye, Aye, my son. Man the sheets, and we shall bring the foe down together!"*

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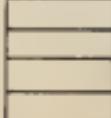
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